



Ane suqh' ile. I keep quiet

Focusing on women's agency in western Tigray, North-Ethiopia

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Thesis submitted to the Cand. Polit. Degree
Department of Social Anthropology
University of Bergen, Norway
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If we do not see that all human agents stand in a position of appropriation in relation to the social world, which they constitute and reconstitute in their actions, we fail on an empirical level to grasp the nature of human empowerment (Giddens 1991: 175).

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	13
From a gendered point of view	14
Theoretical influences	16
An outline of the chapters	19
 CHAPTER 1	
LOCATING THE 'FIELD'; POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER	22
Ethiopia on the Horn of Africa	22
Modernisation and economic sectors	24
Political implications in Ethiopia and Tigray	25
The situation prior to and at the time of my fieldwork	27
The field; locations	29
The 'field' as a situation	32
Positioning myself as an actor; interference	33
Participant observation in practice	35
 CHAPTER 2	
REPRESENTATION, SELF- PRESENTATION: A SITUATION	38
Personal experiences; memories	39
Collective experiences and Tigrayan identity	41
Silenced stories	43
The biographic narrative in flux	44
'Cards' to be played	46
Self-presentation in front of the camera	49
Photographic situations and photographable situations	51
 CHAPTER 3	
PHOTOGRAPHY AS METHODOLOGY	54
Reality and represented reality	55
Photography as a representational system	56
Photography as discourse	57
Photography as a discursive social practice	60
<i>Emic</i> understanding of photographic representations	62
Interpreting photographs in a social anthropological context	65

CHAPTER 4	
GENDER-PRACTICE; GENDERED IDENTITY	69
Women's culture	69
Motherhood and strategic positioning	72
Space for agency; Rahwa's choice	74
Privatised experience; Saba's story	76
Modern versus traditional influences	80
New knowledge; old symbols	83
 CHAPTER 5	
BODY-PRACTICE, DISCOURSE ON SELF; LIFE-STORIES	85
Body regimes and moral implications	86
Agency and causality in a relational perspective	88
The <i>buda</i> , possessor of the 'evil eye'	89
"We have <i>buda</i> in our family"	91
Witchcraft explanations	92
Abeba's story; a story about violence and <i>sheyt'an</i> , Satan	94
Pursuing an education, being possessed	96
 CHAPTER 6	
POSITIONING A GENDERED ACTOR	99
Why Lemlem died	100
Explaining possession	101
Spirits and revolutionary influences	103
Managing fragile social relationships	105
Tension and conflicting interests	107
Alliance-building challenged by women's agency	109
Women's resilience	112
 CONCLUSION	115
 Epilogue	121
 Appendix 1: Posters and local portrait photography	123
Appendix 2: Vocabulary	130
 Bibliography	134

INTRODUCTION

Individuation is often understood as a feature of modernity, but Donald N. Levine states in *Wax and Gold*, his study from Ethiopia in the 1960's, that "[a] characteristic individualism has impressed more than one observer of Abyssinian [the Ethiopian highland] society in the past" (Levine 1967: 238). His statement counters a preconceived stereotype image of Africans as collectivistic only, and similarly the notion that individuality is quenched in more traditionally based societies.

On the other hand I was led to ask, whose individuality? Levine's and other socio-historical accounts are largely based on the individual man's possibility to acquire economic status and political positions either in their own locality (Bauer 1977), or by taking part in regional or national power struggles (Zewde 1991, Marcus 1994, Erlich 1996). Up until the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, the hierarchical social structure comprising of feudalism and powerful nobility with *gulti*¹ rights, was not solely based on classes as such with inherent hereditary positions, but in flux, and could result in upward or downward mobility for both rich and poor, high and low, according to individual achievements and successful alliance-building. Rich peasants could likewise face losing their status from one generation to the next through famine, war, loss of land in court, or by a reduction in livestock caused by disease (Young 1997). However, the Tigrayan revolution², where thirty percent of the fighters at some point were women (Hammond 1999, Young 1997), is a strong expression of women's participation. One question is if this was just an exception, a unique historical possibility to escape a traditionally oppressed position as women. Or, if this was an act partly made possible by this very socio-historical context, where it has been reported as customary for women to take part in war expeditions as camp-followers at least from the seventeenth century onwards (Pankhurst 1992).

According to Ellen Corin (1998), 'individuation' as influenced by Marcel Mauss ([1938] 1985), does not refer to subjective experience only, "but to the structural possibility, framed within the culture itself, of distancing *vis-à-vis* the defining power of the social and cultural order" (Corin 1998: 84, *italics in original*). This point is important to avoid seeing individuation

¹ Rights held usually by nobles or the Orthodox Church, (but could also be granted other individuals for appreciated contribution in ongoing power struggles) to collect tax, usually in kind, from the population in a specific area. Following John Young "[t]he emperor had the power to grant *gulti* rights over land to favoured individuals who could retain part of the taxes collected and pass the balance on to the monarch" (Young 1997: 40).

² The Tigrayan revolution promised among other things, discontinuation of feudalism and land to the peasants. It also addressed women's position in society. The struggle (1975-1991) which started out as a separatist movement in Tigray, later redesigned its course to overthrow the military regime, *Derg* (1974-1991), who instead of focusing on safeguarding social reform, had specialised on terrorising people all over Ethiopia.

as an exclusively individual process. Hence, one major question to be asked in this thesis is how social and cultural practices generate individuation in the Tigrayan context, and further how gendered implications instruct individual agency.

From a gendered point of view

The material situation in a countryside village in Tigray (and for that sake elsewhere in rural highland Ethiopia) might lead one to think that life has been at a standstill since times immemorial. This visual impression makes it easy to assume that everything is traditional and unavoidably static. Daily life in the towns, and smaller market towns, where modern material culture slowly finds a foothold, might likewise look chaotic and unstructured, but traditional and religious values and norms would most likely still instruct the idea of an ideal life trajectory.

After having endured 17-years of a communal struggle against the *Derg*³, the military regime in Ethiopia (1974-1991), and a people's revolution in Tigray, where land was seized and redistributed from the feudal class to the people, and women's issues were high on the agenda, the traditional sexual division of labour still prevails. The frequency of female headed households suggests however, that many women manage on their own without a husband. Helen Pankhurst (1992) states in her study, *Gender, Development and Identity* from Menz in highland Ethiopia, that marital instability points to hardship and dissatisfaction in the relation between spouses, but "it also demonstrates women's ability to play an active role in decisions that affect their position" (Pankhurst 1992: 1). The strict segregation of men's and women's daily activities likewise prevents men from penetrating all aspects of women's lives. The traditional subordinate position of women in society is thus not everywhere actualised. As a matter of fact, precisely the sexual division of labour and the inherent exclusion of men from knowledge about household tasks seem to make the lack of a spouse more problematic for a man, who is believed not to manage without a wife. However, a high occurrence of prostitution⁴ made me realise that women's agency does not always end in a favourable place when career options are few. Hanna Kebede (1990) notes precisely the outlet prostitution in Ethiopia has represented as a means of livelihood for women who did not marry. Other alternatives have been predominately related to their traditional nurturing role, doing domestic work and serving people for minimal wages.

Interestingly, it literally took me years to understand who of the women had been fighters during the revolution. One point is that I did not ask about it directly, another is that their competence from the field and experiences as fighter-women, to a large extent is under-communicated and implicitly disqualified. Women's life-stories however, reveal resilient individuals able of physical mobility as well as flexibility in their daily lives. This empirical reality

³ *Derg*, literally meaning 'committee' in *Amharinya*, the official language in Ethiopia.

⁴ See Inger Cecilie Thoresen (1997) for a study on prostitution in Debre Berhan, North-Ethiopia.

makes it impossible to simply group together traditional/collectivist/oppressed as opposed to modern/individualistic/agency. Instead I will explore how these different classifications can signify potential independent strategies used by individual actors, to resist or comply with existing norms depending on the situation.

Social sanctions seemed at first glance to target women more explicitly, even though gender norms might address women and men equally. One example is the Orthodox Church which demands that both men and women refrain from having sex before marriage. While the young bride in a rural village still risks being returned if it is discovered she is not a virgin – earlier she would face the shame of being sent home on a donkey, now she has to walk on her own feet – there is no similar social sanctions in the play of young men's sexual practice. No one seems to expect them to be abstinent, because they are men. The exception is if he wants to be a priest; otherwise secrecy seems to be the only requirement. However, young women risk being stigmatised as *shermut'a*, prostitutes, by the very fact that they go to school. Hence, my concern is with identifying how agency and society's structuring impact on individual actors are interwoven; tracing socialising processes as manifested through social sanctions, as well as actors' choices and individual careers over time. Most likely however, these processes are not any individual versus society. I will therefore explore how agency is instructed by gender norms. My hypothesis is that precisely gender norms must be seen to constitute a structural boundary for individual agency, both for women and men. Hence, I will define how social sanctions concerned with limiting individual agency target deviance from culturally sanctioned gender practices.⁵ I will also identify spaces for individual agency beyond the norm made possible by the social structure itself.

However, since understanding the dynamic relation between individual actors and society has not only been my concern, I feel the need to take a swift detour to locate my analytic perspective within the social anthropological tradition itself, as well as clarifying the theoretical influences concerning my treatment of a gendered actor⁶.

⁵ However, social sanctioning of women's behaviour must be seen as relating to menarche, and both younger girls and older women would be controlled relatively less and be allowed more physical mobility than their fertile sisters without risking their moral reputation. Elder women would also enjoy a great deal of respect from family as well as the local community, as mothers.

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu (1977) uses the concept 'agent', while Fredrik Barth ([1959] 1996) uses 'actor' when referring to acting entities. In my opinion these concepts get their main divergent meanings from the theories they have been associated with; Bourdieu's theory of practice and Barth's action theory. Since Bourdieu's main concern is the collective structuring principle of social agents, I prefer to use the concept 'actor' for its free-spirited connotations accomplished through Barth's theory, even if I acknowledge varying structural limits to individual agency. In those cases where I am explicitly referring to Bourdieu's theory, I will use his concept 'agent'.

Theoretical influences

As a first-year student of social anthropology I remember the shocking realisation that social structure, from the point of view of Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice and his definition of the concept *habitus*⁷, would be situated inside my body without my conscious consent. My perceived freedom as an independent actor, aspiring for Sartre's idealised self, who meets the world afresh in every new situation, was profoundly challenged. Structure, as an imaginary rationale of coercion, was with Bourdieu's theory extended from the functioning of social institutions, and how they were interpreted as contributing to the persistence of the system as a whole or of particular patterns of social action, to being embodied as well as reproduced within individual agents.

This merging of structure and agents counters a structural-functionalist perspective, where individual actors were interpreted as mere "abstracted constructs conceptualised as the incumbents of positions and statuses, defined in terms of rights and duties, and (...) further conceptualised as forming logically interdependent clusters" (Garbett 1970: 218). Challenging this structural-functionalist view, Fredrik Barth (1959) claims in his study of social organisation among the Swat Pathans, that recruitment to different political groups was based on free choice and self-interest, and that actors' choices might even be "temporary and revocable" (Barth [1959] 1996: 2). Based in transactional analyses, Barth's action theory, even if it has been criticised for not clarifying the aspect of power and the impact on individual actors (Klausen 1990), thus marks a paradigmatic shift of analytic focus in social anthropology from tracking down fixed group entities, to understanding the processes that make up these entities over time. As Marilyn Strathern states from her research in Melanesia: "Far from being fixed in time at the moment of birth, relations were the active life on which the person was forever working" (Strathern 1994: 215).

As social change was perceived more and more as the order of the day, this shift to see interaction and relationships as actor-centred has gradually been enhanced. In fact, on an increasingly diverse and changing contemporary life-scene, Jo Helle-Valle argues that, "focus *needs* to be directed towards individuals interacting in specific settings" (Helle-Valle 1997: 5, *my italics*), to be able to differentiate and understand the multitude of processes in play. This analytic perspective will also be applied on my data from Tigray where individuality and alliance-building have been described as a socio-historical reality before modernity and globalisation, as western frameworks, were introduced.

However, instead of seeing individuals as overloaded with the weight of cultural and social constraints or focusing on individual agency only, I interpret the individual actor as situated in this very tension between individuality and social structure, between self and

⁷ Bourdieu's use of the concept *habitus* is as embodied "durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu 1977: 72, *italics in original*).

society. Edward LiPuma (1998) is using the concept 'dividual' for an individual's relational anchoring. He emphasises that, "*persons emerge precisely from that tension between dividual and individual aspects / relations*" (LiPuma 1998: 57, *italics in original*). This dialectic process, Brian Morris suggests, is "mediated via social praxis" (Morris 1994: 13), thus making it important to observe how and where conflicting interests between subjective priorities and societies' norms materialise. Likewise, subjective experience and personal history must be seen as influencing how social constraints are perceived and acted upon.

My handling of the individual actor in this thesis has likewise been concerned with what I think is obvious; that actors are rational. But, I do not thereby claim resemblance with the ideal rational actor in game theory; always consciously calculating, in her quest for maximum benefits. Instead I think it is imperative to take into account that calculation is not the only initiator of action. Situations and their possibilities could, following Philip Gulliver (1971) with a reference to Max Weber, be misconceived, and high emotion or depression could make people do things they otherwise would not have done. The rational actor might therefore be both "stupid, obstinate, short-sighted", as well as "calculating, alert, intelligent", and sometimes "something in between" (Gulliver in Turner 1974: 35). This latter interpretation of a rational actor will also instruct my use of the words 'agency' and 'strategy'; thus incorporating the ambiguity implicit in human action.

However, the reason why I interpret the relationship between individual actors and society as tension is that these two levels cannot be fully reconciled. The 'individual actor' and 'society' are entities that merge only partly, and this relationship will always depend on a certain use of coercive force by the latter. Hence, my use of the concept 'society' is concerned with the multitude of relations within bounded communities, and the cohesive and coercive mechanisms that are at play to maintain a sense of entity. The local community would further implicate relations (and tensions) towards the regional and national state apparatus, implicating other relations of power.⁸ Relations to the government and the state bureaucracy have not been my main concern in this thesis however, but I have taken note of the fear among commoners about the possibility of reprisals from the state even if the elected representatives, as well as the administrative institutions in Tigray today, to a large extent are comprised of comrades from the Tigrayan people's revolution. I have also noted the voiced contradiction between the local community and the government in the case of discourses on witchcraft and possession.

Pursuing an analytic perspective on these latter contradiction I think Fredrik Barth's (2002) use of the concept 'traditions of knowledge' is instructive. His concept avoids a hierarchical ranking between modern and traditional processes. Likewise, rather than understanding culture

⁸ See Lovise Aalen (2002) *Ethnic Federalism in a Dominant Party State: The Ethiopian Experience 1991-2000*, and Siegfried Pausewang & Kjetil Tronvoll (eds.) *The Ethiopian 2000 elections: democracy advanced or restricted?* Human Rights Report No. 3/2000.

as diffusely shared, Barth interprets 'knowledge' as actively *distributed* within a specific group of people. Likewise important for my discussion, is his claim that this perspective will secure spaces for agency in our analysis. In other words, I am concerned with how culture affects agency, rather than with culture for its own sake, and thus how it is manipulated by individual actors. As Gananath Obeyesekere states, "[c]ultural ideas are being constantly validated by the nature of subjective experience" (Obeyesekere 1981: 113, *italics in original*), and thus the influence culture may have on actors cannot be understood as predestined.

With my focus on tension, the actor implicitly becomes the connecting link between agency and different structural processes by the very fact that she relates to and, according to Bourdieu (1977), embodies both in her daily life. Even though the Comaroffs remind us that "[w]ithout human agents, without specified locations and moments and actions, realities are not realized, nothing takes place, the present has no presence" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999: 295), my thesis is no doubt based in a dilemma, in a tension within social anthropological research itself, concerning how to analytically handle individuals versus societies; and not any individual, but gendered actors both resisting and complying with societies' norms. Henrietta Moore (1994) criticises Bourdieu's theory of practice for not adequately theorising individual experiences and motivations, as she emphasises the importance of addressing the issues of desire, identification, fantasy and fear in understanding human agency. She goes on to say that "[e]ach individual has a personal history and it is in the intersection of this history with collective situations, discourse and identities that the problematic relationship between structures and praxis, and between the social and the individual, resides" (Moore 1994: 49-50). It is also from this perspective that gender must be understood to make a difference.

My research confirms that the relationship between gendered individuals and society is complex, and likewise that the social reality in Tigray is more diverse than either a coarse group-perspective or actor-centred analytical perspectives manage to incorporate on their own. Therefore my fieldwork experience convinced me of the necessity to apply a multiple view, as well as multiple methodologies, tracing somehow simultaneously both individual agency and normative discourse, and their manifestations in social practice. And lastly, my own sociability happened to mark the limits to my social 'field'; as I came to learn, social relations are not just there, they have to be established and reassured, the latter continuously.

In the following I will provide a short outline of my research project in Tigray, and how I proceeded to be able to draw my conclusions.

An outline of the chapters

In chapter 1, after presenting the region and the field, I will go on to discuss fieldwork methodology. My actual position in the field challenges what James Clifford (1997) calls the 'disciplinary habitus', the hard lived academic imperative still instructing social anthropological research, implicating the researcher as "an ungendered, unraced, sexually inactive subject" (Clifford 1997: 202). Since my gender happened to be perceived as ambiguous; since I could not run away from my skin colour constituting me as a *ferenji*, foreigner and 'Other'; and lastly, since it was not a secret that I had a love affair going with a Tigrayan man, I will pursue a methodology that positions the researcher as an actor in the local community.

The point of departure for this thesis was based in my photographic practice, and involves representing people's self-presentations (chapter 2). When photographing in Tigray I was repeatedly amazed by what seemed to be people's concern about being portrayed, as well as by their serious looks and often conventional, frontal poses. I was likewise struck by the general silence surrounding personal and collective experiences of recent famines and wars. Thus life-stories became an important entrance to explore how self-presentation and self-representation are used as strategies in social interaction.

In chapter 3, I will discuss photography as methodology, which in my opinion made possible both the establishing of relations, as well as representing aspects of my empirical material visually. Conducting my social anthropological fieldwork, photography has been an important means of communicating with people; a field in its own right. I had, through repeated visits to Tigray since 1993, established myself as 'The Photographer', a role that was appreciated and put to use by the locals. As the Colliers say in *Visual Anthropology*: "Photographs can be communication bridges between strangers that can become pathways into unfamiliar, unforeseen environments and subjects" (Collier et al. 1986: 99). In my experience this does not concern only the actual photographs, but also includes the process of photographing when based in mutual dialogue. The photographs in this thesis are presented as fragments of photographic narratives throughout the text, representing their self-presentations. These visual representations are not simply a visual emphasis of the text, but parallel narratives, and thus a narrative strategy to represent an empirical reality *differently* from the text. This is emphasised by the layout, where the top section of the pages will be reserved for the visual representations, implicitly contextualising the text visually.

Even though modern influences are usually interpreted as opening up for individuation and changes in perceptions of self-identity, this cannot be taken for granted in the Tigrayan context, where at least men's individuality has been favoured long before modernity, as a western concept was actualised. I will discuss this theme by presenting women's life-stories that reveal resistance as well as compliance (chapter 4). Modernity could be interpreted as providing at least some backing to women's agency, especially through access to modern education, and thus to a particular tradition of knowledge. But equally importantly, women's strategies must

be viewed in relation to both the socio-historical reality as well as the contemporary situation of the region, of invariably recurring wars and famines, as well as poverty. In this context mobility and flexibility, as well as the need to build alliances, must be understood as historically based social strategies. However, even if traditional norms in relation to an ideal life-trajectory seem to prevail, I discovered that there is a coexisting pragmatic attitude towards a life that might, and often does take another less preferable turn.

In chapter 5 and 6 I will go on to discuss local discourse⁹ and its impact on autonomy, and hence on individual agency. Tigrayan discourses on witchcraft and possession reveals an understanding of the 'individual actor' and of 'agency' that is more indistinct than the western concepts, which despite acknowledging external influences and power, are ideologically based on one embodied autonomous self. The point of departure for my discussion is men's and women's life-stories, and their own reflections on the causal aspect of lived life. These narratives are represented to be able to trace individual strategies over time. This research strategy is based on the fact that I did not discover the extent of women's agency by merely observing their daily activities; tending to different household tasks, rearing children and conducting the coffee ceremony. Thus I will explore how women's seeming compliance with the gender norm could be interpreted from the point of view of their life-stories.

However, it also matters how the story is told. Life-stories are edited sequences of lived life, and past experiences are narrated as a present event.¹⁰ What is given significance in the biographic narrative would likewise be dependent on a cultural understanding of what should be an ideal life-trajectory. The narrated Tigrayan life-story thus relates to a normative structuring of life in the Tigrayan context 'emplotted' to use John Borneman's (1992) conception, by historical events of the region, of famine and wars. The norm itself could be understood to constitute a 'master narrative' (Borneman 1992, Moore 1994), which every individual actor narrate in relation to; and consequently in and out of. Based in a historical reality it could likewise be assumed that many Tigrayans have endured traumatic experiences. I noticed however that painful emotions were excluded from their representations of life-experiences. If painful experiences such as the death of close relatives were included, they would appear as mere facts. The life-stories must therefore be understood as dependent on what is culturally possible to tell in which context. Or, to follow Allen Feldman: "[t]he event is not what happened. The event is

⁹ Discourse in this thesis is taken to mean particular verbal or visual representations which implicitly constitute specific views of social/cultural worlds. See Randi Kaarhus (1992) for a discussion on the use of the concept.

¹⁰ Edward M. Bruner makes a distinction between "life as lived (reality), life as experienced (experience), and life as told (expression)" (Bruner 1984: 6). Likewise, with a reference to Jean Francois Lyotard, Allan Feldman (1991) see event, agency and narration as forming a 'narrative bloc', "defined as the achronic engenderment of narrative, agency (narration) and event (...) a constellation of events, and discourses about events, as an Event" (Feldman 1991: 14). I certainly acknowledge these distinctions, but my discussion will primarily be focused on the cultural practice of narrating, and thus, with implications for social interaction as well as individual agency.

that which can be narrated” (Feldman 1991: 14, *italics in original*). However, the implicit mobility in Tigrayan narratives became an entrance to understanding a cultural strategy concerned with securing flexibility in social interaction.

An apparent mistrust within social relations makes people tend to hold back information about themselves. I therefore decided to conduct the semi-structured interviews in my home with only the interviewee and myself present; creating a situation of secrecy that could be interpreted as ‘safe’. I also knew the people I interviewed quite well in advance; thus being familiar with bits and pieces of their biographic data. The interview situation represented a possibility to be allowed to use what I knew already, as well as giving them the chance to add (or omit) information, as well as to reflect on their experiences. They all agreed to have their interviews taped, allowing me to go back and recheck translations. For the above-mentioned reasons I have changed all persons’ names in the text, except for those I photographed that could be identified anyway. Likewise, I do not always connect people to specific places.

During my first visits to the area I experienced women as more reserved towards me than the men, who readily came forward with their curiosity and wish for discussion and dialogue. As a foreigner and guest I had likewise found myself, more often than not, being invited to eat with the men rather than with the women. However, I experienced that the coffee ceremony generously offered an entrance into women’s lives, and eventually into their life-stories. In my opinion, the life-stories represented in this thesis are not exceptional, as I have interviewed and know more women than those given space here. And even though not all women have been fighters or travelled abroad, it also takes courage to run away from arranged marriages and challenge the teaching of the Orthodox Christian Church and implicitly God, by insisting on birth control.

In the following chapter I will locate my ‘field’ and discuss the positioning of the researcher as an actor in her own right, likewise elaborate on why I methodologically, think this is a fruitful positioning.

Chapter 1

LOCATING THE 'FIELD'; POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER

As a photographer I had found my field in western Tigray, in North-Ethiopia long before I even considered studying social anthropology. Like travellers before me, Ethiopia had in my impression a kind of mythic glow, as well as being a country of recurring famines and wars. Tigray had been the stage for both; an ancient civilisation and contemporary disasters.

The first state formation in the area is known as the Kingdom of Da'amat. Dating as far back as the first millennium B.C., and situated in the highlands of western Tigray, Da'amat had developed irrigated, intensive agriculture as well as being involved in extensive trade. The Kingdom of Da'amat was succeeded by the Axumite Empire (100-800 A.D.), basically comprising of today's Eritrea and Tigray, as well as parts of Yemen. The Axumite state extended mercantile relations and gained monopoly on trade-routes on the Red Sea and Indian Ocean regions, as well as penetrating westwards into inland Africa. These trade routes broke down as Muslim power and influence grew in the eighth century, and the Axumite state lost control of both the Red Sea-Indian Ocean as well as its monopoly on ivory and gold from the interior of Africa; and consequently started its decline. Nevertheless, the Axumite state managed to expand southwards into the Agew area, but was subsequently challenged by the Agews themselves and the Zagwe dynasty took over and moved the centre of power from Axum southward to Wollo (Marcus 1994).

The region: Ethiopia on the Horn of Africa

Ethiopia is located in northeast Africa, on what is known as the Horn of Africa, including Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti and Kenya. Ethiopia is bounded by Sudan in the north and west, Kenya in the south, Somalia in the southeast, Djibouti in the east, and Eritrea in the northeast and north. The region, with its plurality concerning ethnicity and religion, has a long history of interaction through trade and migrations as well as through conflicts; instability has been rife in the region. Somalia has lacked a centralised administration for the last twelve years. The conflict in Sudan has lasted on and off since independence in 1956. Likewise, Ethiopia and Eritrea had been through decades of liberation struggles before they clashed in a devastating war in May 1998. The dispute over the location of their communal border is believed to have complex causes, and remains unsolved.¹ Economically Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the

¹ The reason why a map of Tigray / Ethiopia (and its border with Eritrea) is not enclosed in this thesis is a conscious choice to avoid political implications.

world. Despite the popular claim that the country has the potential to feed all of its estimated 67 million² people, political instability and warfare have added negatively to the more or less cyclic returns of drought. Hence, the combination of recurring famines and wars contributes to an almost continuous humanitarian crisis in the region.

Ethiopia is situated close to Equator. The different altitudes ranging from 125 meters under sea level in the Denakil Depression to the north-east, the highest mountain Ras Dashen 4620 meters above sea level (masl) in the north-west, as well as the vast central highlands, gives way for differing climates; from being the hottest place on earth to a chill that is not usually related to the tropics. Ethiopians divide their country topographically into different climatic zones, in *Tigrinya*³ called; *duga* (above 1500 masl), the highlands; *wayna duga* (1500-1000 masl), lower highlands and cool sub-humid zone; *q'olla* (1000-500 masl), lowlands and warm semi-arid zone; and *berekha* (500 masl and below), hot and unpopulated arid zone. Agriculture, which employs around eighty percent of the population countrywide, is believed to have developed as early as the third millennium B.C.; the plough being a feature of Ethiopian cultivation as old as agriculture itself (Marcus 1994).

Ethiopia is often perceived as a symbol of strength and pride, profoundly rooted in its old history of independence and mythic glory of its kings. This pride also concerns the fact that Ethiopia managed to avoid being colonised, except for the Italian occupation during 1935-41. This does not mean however, that Ethiopia has avoided alien political and economic influences altogether. Portugal, Italy, Britain, USA and the Soviet Union have all at different points in time attempted to gain political influence or economic privileges in the country. However, Ethiopia's territory has expanded since the succumbing of the Axumite Kingdom at the end of the first millennium A.D. The modern state of Ethiopia was constituted as a process under successive emperors from the middle of the nineteenth century to the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie. During this period of expansion, Ethiopia was itself a colonising power including areas in the west and south of its territory; placing limits on western colonisation in the process.

Concerning generalisations about Ethiopia, Helen Pankhurst draws attention to the fact that "the diversity of cultures and societies tend to be forgotten, submerged by an over-representation of the Christian Amhara" (H. Pankhurst 1992: 12). Ethiopia is said to have around eighty different ethnic groups with approximately the same number of local languages. These can be divided into four language groups: the Semitic, Cushitic, Omitic and Nilotic. *Amharinya*, the official language in Ethiopia, and *Tigrinya*, spoken in Tigray, belong to the Semitic language group and are both derived from Geez, which is still used by the clergy in the Ethiopian

² According to *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia* the population was 53.477.265. Estimated population for 2003 is 66.557.553 (CIA - The World Factbook, update 1st August 2003, www.cia.gov).

³ *Tigrinya* is the local language in Tigray. There are no standard rules for transliterating from the Geez alphabet to Latin letters. See appendix 2 for some notes on transliterations in this thesis.



Traditional stone-house, *h'edmo* with timber ceiling, and a stone and clay roof. The roof could also be used for storage. Edaga Hebrat, February 2001.

Orthodox Church. The Oromo ethnic group is the largest in Ethiopia, followed by the *Amhara* and *Tigraway*, *Tigrinya*-speaking Tigrayans.⁴

Religious practise is an important part of daily life in Ethiopia. Even though TPLF's doctrine during the Tigrayan revolution were influenced by the organisation's Marxist-Leninist sympathies, people's religious sentiments were not challenged like the military regime, *Derg*, perceived to be atheist, had done. According to John Young, "the *Derg*'s assault on the Church and the mosque and their rural representatives was a major cause of peasant estrangement" (Young 1977: 178), and thus contributed to the failure of the *Derg*'s project of initiating a social revolution in Ethiopia. Christianity was made state religion in the Axumite Kingdom as early as the 4th century A.D. The distribution of Orthodox Christians and Muslims in today's Ethiopia are often, probably for stabilising political reasons, referred to as approximately equal. This claim does not coincide with numbers in *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia*⁵, stating a significantly higher number of Orthodox Christians nationally. Likewise, the combination of these religious groups varies profoundly in different areas; Tigray being a predominantly Orthodox Christian area.⁶ Although Orthodox Christians and Muslims in the region might seem to live harmoniously side-by-side, sharing much common culture in spite of their different religious beliefs, I think it is important to emphasise that my knowledge is essentially gained through interaction with Orthodox Christians.

Modernisation and economic sectors

The quest for control and power on the part of the Ethiopian monarchs was, according to Fassil G. Kiros (1993), an important incentive in the modernisation project of the Ethiopian state, and "part and parcel of the process of national state formation and centralization of political power, which in the Ethiopian case was strongly influenced by the necessity to repel external aggression" (Fassil 1993: 53). Modernisation in the case of Ethiopia came to mean a centralised state apparatus, including ministerial and regional administration, introduction of modern means of communication and transportation, and a national army. This modernisation developed over a period of several decades since the turn of the 20th century, a new economic structure consisting of the modern sector and the traditional sector; with islands of new economic activities and services basically centred in the capital city and regional towns. The traditional sector consisted of the vast rural regions inhabited by traditional subsistence producers.

⁴ According to *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia*, Oromo constitute 32,1 %, Amhara 30,1 % and Tigraway 6,2 % of the total population in Ethiopia.

⁵ According to *The 1994 Census*, the total number of Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia are 50,6 %, 10,2 % are Protestants and 32,8 % Muslims, leaving 6,4 % to other beliefs.

⁶ *The 1994 Census* also states that 95,4 % of the population in Tigray are Orthodox Christians and 4,1 % Muslims.



In the foreground is the enclosure for keeping the cattle at night. The enclosure is moved around weekly to manure the entire field. Mayshek, February 2001.

However, it was the Ethiopian peasantry who carried the economic burden of the state-initiated modernisation, “with little or no change in the structure and technology of the traditional production system” (Fassil 1993: 58), and thus did not gain from the process themselves.⁷ Further, Fassil draws attention to the early economic development in Western Europe where it was precisely these technological changes and increased agricultural production that opened up for industrialisation and urban employment, whereas the Ethiopian urban centres were foremost centres of consumption, not production. Living marginally most of the time, the rural producers were trapped in “unequal exchange” (Fassil 1993: 62), never gaining a price that would reflect their work and the cost of producing their commodities. As Helen Pankhurst (1992) notes, subsistence economy implies exactly a lack of integration in exchange relations, and hence that any disaster is met only with goods produced within the community. She further emphasises the absence of investment and surplus, and the difficulty to accumulate. “Grain cannot be stored easily and the value of livestock, the main form of alternative investment, is highly sensitive to drought and slow to recover from it” (Pankhurst 1992:20). That fertilizers and so-called improved seeds have arrived entangles the peasants more and more into the modern economy, but with the most optimistic hope ever to produce enough for one year’s consumption on their small plots. Taking both the pressure on land and land degradation into consideration, seeing the Tigrayan subsistence peasant as economically ‘trapped’, could in my opinion be fully justified.⁸

Likewise, Ethiopia could equally be seen as economically trapped in a situation as exporter of raw materials, basically, agricultural products such as livestock, hides, coffee and *chat* (a leaf with stimulating properties). Including gold, these are all products involved in a globalised economy, where prices are decided elsewhere, and consequently add to the country’s economic vulnerability.

Political implications in Ethiopia and Tigray

Present-day Ethiopia is divided into nine administrative regions, with the towns of Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa having their own administrative status, the latter serving as the federal capital city. The regions are ethnically based, and have as their constitutional right the possibility to

⁷ This technology has its justification in the fact that the plow, *meheresha*, following Tronvoll, “is especially adapted to light and friable soil, as is found on the Eritrean/Ethiopian plateau. In such areas the major problem is to prevent moisture from rising to the surface by capillary movement. If a heavier plow was employed on such soil, it would damage the capillaries and cause the sparse water to evaporate during the drought period. The *meheresha* (...), merely scratches the soil, thus keeping the capillary system intact, even though the fields are plowed and cross-plowed several times” (Tronvoll 1998: 54).

⁸ Above 83 % of the population in Tigray is dependent on primary rain-fed, subsistence agriculture.
www.u-fondet.no



Usually houses in the rural villages are built of stone, and are circular or square in shape. Not all of them are the *h'edmo*-type with timber ceiling. The circular houses would traditionally have a thatched straw roof. Independent of type, most of the houses in this village now have corrugated iron roofs. Adi Erar, May 2002.

secede from the federation.⁹ This reorganisation of the Ethiopian state took place after 1991 when EPRDF¹⁰, the TPLF-based coalition, overthrew the military regime, and the *Derg's* despotic leader Mengistu Haile Mariyam fled the country. The opposition groups fighting against the *Derg* were already ethnically based, as TPLF in Tigray, and according to Siegfried Pausewang, "a new government would not get sufficient legitimacy without providing more self rule to ethnic groups" (Pausewang 2000: 263, *my translation from Norwegian*). However, that the relationship between the state and the regions is a source of tension and conflict is not a new phenomenon in the Ethiopian context. Lovise Aalen (2002) discusses this point in her study *Ethnic Federalism in a Dominant Party State*:

"[a] central issue in Ethiopian politics past and present is the struggle between regional and central forces. During the imperial era, the struggle was expressed through continuous disputes between the central king or Emperor and the regional lords and princes. When the Marxist military junta [*Derg*] came to power in 1974, the ethnically based movements replaced the lords and princes as regional forces" (Aalen 2002: 2).

Aalen further points to the fact that since EPRDF came to power, two parallel, and somehow contrary, political processes have been going on at the same time. The constitution enhances regional self-government and autonomy as well as promising representation at federal level. The political party in power, on the other hand, has created satellite parties to secure its influence in the different regions, and implicitly its continued rule of the federation. The strongest political opposition to the present government comes from OLF, Oromo Liberation Front, which the Ethiopian government, with support in today's world situation, can classify as a terrorist organisation.

During the Tigrayan revolution TPLF established political mass participation in the liberated areas. People's participation have persisted to this day, meetings at *igri q'om*, under the [big] tree, are regular, and implicate that all major political questions, at some point, have to be discussed (or propagated) at this level; as was the EPRDF-government's major programmatic proclamation *Abyotawi Demokrasi*, Revolutionary Democracy, during the time of my fieldwork. However, Tigrayans' continued loyalty to TPLF seems to prevent major political disagreements. That twelve members of the TPLF Central Committee walked out at a meeting in March 2001, over a disagreement on decisions taken during the war with Eritrea, was perceived as a blow to this implicit loyalty. It follows that the dissidents were dispelled and faced charges of corruption.

⁹ The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 8th December 1994. Article 39: Rights of Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples. (1) Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession (Fasil Nahum 1997: 229).

¹⁰ Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front



A more common strategy is to say “*ishi*, OK” and try to avoid confrontation. One young man having participated in a community meeting where the war with Eritrea was discussed, said that when they were asked if they would be willing to fight they all raised their hands saying “*ishi*”, but he knew there were more people than him present who would use the first opportunity to run away if they had to. This ambiguous loyalty is noted by Aalen, when she states that “people are aware of the control and reprisal abilities of the party and find it hard to oppose its policies. (...) This combination of fear and loyalty makes people unwilling to criticise the party” (Aalen 2002: 87). Likewise, supporting TPLF is perceived as securing access to limited resources and potential privileges like the peasants’ annual loans for fertilizers. What complicates this matter further is the fact that the Ethiopian government and the state bureaucracy are perceived as, and to a large extent are merged; both are related to as *mengisti*, and make interaction with the state for whatever prosaic reason a matter of political balancing. One state employee in Tigray said he would have preferred not to be a member of TPLF, but that “they [the party] would make too much out of it if I wasn’t”; thinking that he would lose his possibility for additional education and promotion, as it would be interpreted as though he was against the government.

The situation prior to and at the time of my fieldwork

The Eritrea-Ethiopian war, officially starting when Eritrea invaded Ethiopia in May 1998, came as a shock to people both inside and outside the two countries. The two liberation fronts that had joined forces against the *Derg*, and in both countries made the base for new governments from 1991 onwards, were suddenly enemies in the fiercest battles known on the African continent since World War II¹¹. One Tigrayan woman in her forties who prevented her son from enrolling, said that the Eritrean-Ethiopian war seemed so much worse than the 17-years of struggle against the *Derg*. “So many have died,” she said quietly. It is not my purpose to venture deeper into the causes of the war here,¹² but both countries have been inflicted by a substantial loss of personnel and profound setbacks in already weak, but promising economies.

The Peace Treaty was signed in Algiers, 12th December 2000, and a temporary security zone (TSZ) established until the border is fully demarcated. The Eritrean-Ethiopian Boundary Commission (EEBC), situated in Haag, announced its ruling in April 2002. Where Badme belongs and where the fighting started in May 1998, was not clearly (enough) stated at the time, resulting in both countries claiming victory after the ruling was known. New clarifications

¹¹ Following Kjetil Tronvoll: “The Badme battle (and the subsequent Tsorona offensive) was probably the biggest military battle in the history of Africa since the allied forces pushed Nazi Germany out of north Africa during World War II. (...) But the human costs were extraordinarily high with possibly as many as 20.000 troops, mostly Ethiopians, lost during the four-day offensive [in February 1999]” (Tronvoll 2003: 172-3).

¹² See Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll (2000). *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War*, and Kjetil Tronvoll (2003) *Identities in Conflict. An ethnography of war and the politics of identity in Ethiopia 1998-2000*.

Right: In the village of Adi Etot some of the houses still have thatched straw roofs. April 2002.

Far right: The two-story village houses are built in two stages; first as a traditional *h'edmo*, then the roof is made into an upstairs floor. The new roof is usually corrugated iron. Adi Akhebay, August 2002.

from EEBC in March 2003, explicitly favouring Eritrea's claims to Badme, again heightened the tension between the two countries. The demarcation of the border was meant to start in May 2003, but was postponed to July, then to October, then indefinitely delayed. People I talked to in Badme town in the end of October 2002, expressed their bonds to Ethiopia. However, the question is not where people have lived and actually live, but rather concerns an interpretation of old treaties about where the colonial border is actually situated on the ground. When I asked people in Tigray in June 2003 about the ruling, and the fact that Badme most likely would belong to Eritrea in the future, the loss of Badme seemed first of all inconceivable, and secondly, they said they would be willing to fight again if necessary. Approaching the scheduled time for demarcation in October, the Ethiopian Prime Minister sent a letter to the UN Security Council, stating that it was unimaginable that the Ethiopian people could accept this "blatant miscarriage of justice" particularly awarding Badme to Eritrea which he stated was "illegal, unjust and irresponsible". Likewise he warned that keeping up the commission's decision would lead to "another round of war".¹³

For the people of Tigray, the Eritrean-Ethiopian war was a blow to a slow, but steady development since the *Derg* was chased out and Tigray liberated in 1989. Hundreds of thousands were displaced on both sides of the border, and both governments were deporting the other country's nationals. Both people and trade have been profoundly influenced; the closed border cut off both close family bonds – since intermarriage between Tigrayans and Eritreans had been commonplace – as well as important trade relationships. Many of the Tigrayans being deported from Eritrea found themselves trying to squeeze into, and having to compete within an already weak economy in Tigray. Apart from the emotional turmoil and hatred the war generated, the conflict has contributed to a heightened economic insecurity in Tigray, as well as having shattered the Ethiopian economy in general.¹⁴

I was informed of who had died, but people seemed most of all concerned about getting on. I was told Badme was *h'emaqh'*, bad. I remember the desperate, mad cries from a soldier tied to his bed at the local hospital in Shire/Endaselassie in August 1999, and the shrilling cries of mourners one early morning in Woldia, Wollo in March 2001, as official messages of soldiers' deaths at the front began to reach their families. Otherwise silence seems to prevail in the midst of a noisy and seemingly cheerful daily life.

¹³ BBC, Thursday 25th September, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

¹⁴ According to Tronvoll "Ethiopia's war with Eritrea had a devastating effect on the economy and diverted scarce resources from development (...). After the war broke out the size of the army was increased from 60.000 to 350.000, which increased defence expenditure from USD 95 million in 1997/98 to USD 777 million in 1999/2000. Thus military expenditure became 49,8 percent of the countries total recurrent expenditure. The two-and-a-half year war cost Ethiopia more than USD 2,9 billion (Tronvoll 2003: 26, citing from *Sagalee Haaraa Newsletter*, no 35, December 2001).



The field; locations

My choice of fieldwork in Tigray is based on a general interest in the region, and its peoples' past collective experience of war and famine, and how they relate to this and manage to go on with their lives. My first trip to Ethiopia was in 1993 when I had set out travelling by bus from Addis Ababa to Asmara in Eritrea. Late in December that year, on my way from Gondar to Shire/Endaselassie in western Tigray, I ended up in the small market town of Endabaguna¹⁵ by mere chance. Since it was illegal to drive after dark at the time, the passengers had to stay overnight in this little market town, some 22 kilometres south-west of Shire town. I was directed to a small establishment, a *bunabét* owned by a woman in her thirties. She had five rooms to let in the backyard, and served meals and drinks. I stayed there with her and her four children, aged between twelve and two-and-a-half, for the next week, and was introduced to the local community. I happened to be deeply touched by the place and its people, and went back for another week before I returned to Norway at the end of January 1994. I then revisited the area for two months in 1996, and another two months in the rainy season 1997. When the Eritrean-Ethiopian war broke out, I was not allowed to travel north from Addis Ababa in January 1999; the battle of Badme was soon to be launched, and foreign photographers and journalists were not wanted in the region. I managed to travel to Tigray for a few weeks in July and August that same year, to see how people were coping, leaving my camera equipment in Addis Ababa. I returned twice during 2001, basically to improve my language skills. I returned in December 2001 for my fieldwork which lasted one year. I also visited Tigray for one week in June 2003, and again for one month in July 2004 during the period of writing up my thesis. In January 2001 I had met the Tigrayan man who was to become my husband. We got married in Addis Ababa in July 2002.

In western Tigray my main locations were within the *wereda* Asgede Tsimbla¹⁶, my base being Endabaguna where the *wereda* administration is situated.¹⁷ Endabaguna started expanding as Italians had made it one of their camp-sites in Tigray during their occupation of Ethiopia (1935-41). Their small Catholic church is still there, until recently a *mezegajabét*, municipality, now serving as the local *ferdebét*, courthouse. The market town has an elementary school, a high

¹⁵ When I first came to Endabaguna I thought about it as a village. But people call it *ketema*, a town, opposed to what would be a rural village often with dispersed habitats and without shops and a market.

¹⁶ Until 2002 Tigray was divided into four administrative zones, Western, Central, Eastern and Southern; the western zone was awaiting a division into western and north-western zone with administrative centres in Humera and Shire/Endaselassie respectively. The zones comprise a total of 36 *weredas* (districts) and 620 *tabias/kebeles* (sub-districts) with their own administrations.

¹⁷ Population estimates for Tigray is 3.8 million (REST, 2001: www.u-fondet.no), while it was stated as 3.136.267 according to *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia*. Further the population of Asgede Tsimbla *wereda* was stated as 96.115, Endabaguna 5.504, and Shire/Endaselassie 25.269, according to *The 1994 Census*. Unofficial estimates for 2003 suggest that the population of Asgede Tsimbla has increased to 125.000, Endabaguna to 10.000 and Shire/Endaselassie to 35.000.



school, and a small clinic that can handle the most common casualties. The place has a ground-water supply of clean drinking water as well as electric light.

Except for the civil servants; administrators, agricultural extension workers and teachers usually coming from other parts of Tigray or the Amhara region, the population of Endabaguna today is basically people with their family background in the surrounding villages. They are working as merchants, buying hides and gold from the rural farmers, thus tied up with Ethiopian export, or are running small shops selling ready-mades and imported goods. The *bunabéts*, *sewabéts* and *shaybéts*, meaning bars, local beer houses and teahouses, are to a large extent run by women. The new cafés popping up during my fieldwork selling fruit-juices and *makiato*, Italian style coffee with steamed milk, were all run by young men. During my stay most people were complaining about the insecure economic situation caused by the war and the cutting off of trade relations with Eritrea. However, it is not uncommon that households have family members in Diaspora. In the market town I identified family connections to Israel, Lebanon, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Denmark, as well as different Arab countries. These family members' economic contributions are important to the household economy, and members of the extended family would most likely try their best to get a share of the 'cake'.

Apart from frequent visits to the town of Shire/Endasselassie, I have visited the small towns of Adi Hagaray, Shiraro and Badme closer to the border and thus the contested areas in the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, as well as the regional capital city Mekelle. My choice of mobility has helped me to better understand the general situation in Tigray. Even if the region must be seen as weighed down by hardships and poverty, the overall impression is not that of powerlessness. During the year I stayed for my fieldwork, I was amazed by how many new houses popped up everywhere.

Further, I have regularly visited different rural villages between three to five hours walk away from the market town. Some of these villages belong to what is designated as *q'olla*, lowlands, valley basins that, to a certain extent, was populated by settlers from the highlands in eastern Tigray towards the end of the 1950's. People in the rural villages make their living from subsistence farming. The soil has been rapidly eroding and is prone to droughts; peasants' production of grain would normally last for about six or seven months. People are living on the margins even in a good year.

Although land as a resource in Ethiopia today is owned by the state, and in Tigray referred to as *meret wananet*, our land; this fact does not seem to blur the personal relationship people have to their plot of land with usufruct rights. Conflict in highland Ethiopia has traditionally been rife on the issue of land as based on the old *risti*¹⁸ system; with inherited rights

¹⁸ Sigfried Pausewang comments: "The *rist[i]* system in the north of Ethiopia demonstrates the differences between the inherent logic of a theoretically egalitarian and flexible system of regulating access to land, and a locally varying practice of intrigues, suspicion and conflict" (Pausewang 1990: 40).



Far left: A new type of house built with cement-blocks; this particular one with decorations.

Left: The house next door is a *gidgida* type house of wood and clay. The next picture shows the scaffolding for a *gidgida*, clay-house. Endabaguna, May 2002.

to land that could be claimed generations back both through father and mother's lineages. These land rights could be claimed *de jure*s by both men and women, but not to forget, *if* the claimer had the economic means and necessary alliances to process the case. If women *de facto* were in an economic position to pursue their legal rights to land might be the exception though. It would more likely be their husbands, or other male relatives, who pursued the task. According to Hanna Kebede, "even if in theory female inheritance was possible, the social structures in both Moslem and Christian families were such that properties were almost always transferred to the male heir in the family" (Hanna 1990: 63). However, it is important to note that even with these reservations in mind, female inheritance has and still does constitute a potential economic backing for women's sustenance and implicitly agency.

The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 was concerned with land reform and redistribution, however, this reform did not reach Tigray since the region launched its own revolution, against the regime. It was the redistribution of land from the feudals in Tigray that was one of TPLF's main objectives to be able to mobilise the Tigrayan peasants in the revolutionary struggle. Land was distributed according to household size, and women who registered were also given land. However, since land is a scarce resource, conflicts and subsequent litigations over land and borders between neighbours' plots persist. The first officially organised redistribution of land in Asgede Tsimbla since the revolution was announced when I was about to complete my fieldwork; making it possible for a few younger people to obtain land since their families' plots had already been divided in the past, and had become too small to serve another generation of numerous siblings.

But access to land is not only a material necessity. Tigrayans have a strong sense of belonging and loyalty to their place of birth, *adi*, where, according to the traditional *risti* system, they would have had *risti* rights, meaning rights to both land and membership. Even if *risti* rights are no longer pursuable, the emotional attachment to ones *adi* persists. When I asked the female ex-fighter Lula¹⁹ (35) what *feqh'ri*, love, means to her, she answers: "I love my *adi*." Kjetil Tronvoll notes that "*geographical community* is a much more salient source of identity and object of loyalty for the highlanders than ethnic or clan affiliation (Tronvoll 2003: 107). "*Abey adikhi*, where is your home-place," people would ask me. Visiting Shire / Endaselassie I would be called "*gwal Dabaguna*, the girl from Endabaguna." Walking the streets of Mekelle, I was called "*gwal Tsimbla*, the girl from Asgede Tsimbla", the relationship to ones *adi* being significant as self-identity as well as ascribed identity. Being related to a specific *adi* can also implicate certain qualifications. When I in Addis Ababa was called "*gwal Tembien*, the girl from Tembien", an area in eastern Tigray, the implicit message was that I was perceived as stingy in a cultural climate where generosity is highly valued.

¹⁹ Recorded interview 7th November 2002. Her name is altered.



The 'field' as a situation

Except for the elders who experienced the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, most people's relations to *ferenjjs*, white foreigners in the market town of Endabaguna are to someone that is passing through. The children would usually inform me if one or more white foreigners had passed during the day. Likewise, they would shout "you, you", or "*t'ilyan, t'ilyan*", meaning 'Italian' and implicitly 'foreigner', and run after them. It was a daily procedure that the children would run after me too and shout "*you, you, t'ilyan, t'ilyan*", and drive me completely nuts not being able to go unnoticed for one minute in the public privacy that as a westerner, I have learned to appreciate. Parents would add to this by pointing to me in their children's presence and say "*t'ilyan belliya*", meaning "call her Italian". Venturing to the rural areas, where population density is far less than in the towns was like a breath of fresh air, in more ways than one. However, I believe I was a disappointment to them. One of the local pharmacists told me to bring one more *ferenji* to the market town, "one with money; one that could start up something to improve life in this small town."

On previous visits prior to my fieldwork, I have stayed in a *bunabét*, a small bar with accommodation, where food and bottled beer, soft drinks, and *bun*, coffee are served, the latter three times a day without payment. Since the female owner and head of the household lived and worked in the same place with her children, staying there for one to two months at a time was like being part of a family. Closing my door for some privacy was not easy; wanting to do some reading or studying instead of attending daily social life, was taken as an offence. I was told that they assumed that I did not like them anymore. When I started my fieldwork I therefore felt like getting some more space for being on my own; to tend to my notes, read, write and reflect. Knowing my social limitations, and wanting some privacy to cultivate the relationship with my Tigrayan husband-to-be, I decided to live on my own. I established a base convenient for visits to people in the market town as well as remote villages, with available public transport to other towns in Tigray.

Since I did not feel like living completely alone, I rented a big room with a separate entrance in a newly built house belonging to a Muslim family. The family, husband, wife and three children, lived in the two rooms next door. The house was considered one of the better in town, built from cement-blocks it represented a new generation of houses. Most other houses were built of stone, or were the *gidgida*-version of wood and clay. Contrary to isolating myself, I felt I placed myself in accordance with people's expectations of how a *ferenji* should live. However, after four months in the house our relationship was severed by a discussion about the rent, and what we had actually agreed on in the first place. The man of the house could not understand why I would not assist him with money when he needed it, possibly strengthening our relationship. I was sticking to my 'right' to proceed as initially agreed to. Eventually, he declared I was in the wrong, and if I did not pay him for the rest of the year immediately I had

Far left: One wall with Roman arches remains from the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935-41), and constitutes one wall in a stone house in Shiraro.

Left: Houses in the town of Shiraro, are still marked by shelling from the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998-2000).

Right: An example of the billboards which are found all over Ethiopia informing about the new war against Aids. This board is situated at the water post in front of the Ethiopia Hotel in Shiraro. It says: “for our wishes to come true, we must take care of Aids”, implicating that this is not to be considered a matter of God’s will, only. September 2002

Next pages: Home decorations and display of household goods in two market town houses. Endabaguna, October 2002.



to leave at the end of the month, which I did. I moved to Abeba’s²⁰ house with a few big rooms for rent in the backyard, and close to the local police station. One of the police officers jokingly asked if I felt I needed police protection.

Thus my position as a researcher worked to define my social ‘field’, as some doors closed, others opened. On my previous visits, staying in a *bunabét*, I had come to know more men than women, since the bars are a men’s arena, and women frequenting these places would challenge their moral reputation. Now that I had established a relationship to one man, I felt men generally were more reserved; I guess I got more reserved towards other men too. During my fieldwork my relations to other women deepened; they also seemed more willing than men to share their life-stories with me. Men, on the other hand, seemed more eager to be photographed than the women; the women slowly followed suit though, as they saw that the men were actually given their pictures.

Using photography as methodology, Sarah Pink (1999) experienced that the social anthropological field took on another meaning because “[t]he material culture and social practices of production, display, distribution, exchange, and collection of photographs became as much a part of my ‘field’ as did places, people and performances” (Pink 1999: 71). Hence I choose to see the concept of the ‘field’ not only as a physical space, but also as a situation in time. Literally focusing on embodied persons through my photographic practice, makes it possible to interpret the body itself as a ‘field’.

Positioning myself as an actor; interference

The method of participant observation, which has been the main tool in social anthropological research for nearly a century, has its base in the researcher’s willingness to merge, without reservations as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, into the society and culture she is studying. This methodological imperative of presence, and non-interference at the same time, is in my opinion based on a scientific ideal situation hardly obtainable in real life. Still social anthropology tries hard to maintain this ideal, as if being there and not being there can ever be the same situation. In the following I will claim that this is not the only option available. As my examples will show, information also surfaced in situations where we met as individual actors with possibly conflicting interests.

This realisation is related to the fact that I refused to keep the developing relation to my Tigrayan lover and husband-to-be a secret – as would be a common local strategy to avoid gossip and subsequent social sanctions – essentially because I knew I would not manage it emotionally. I did not know at the time what this would mean in terms of challenges from the local community. Many turned out to be jealous of our relationship, including his former girlfriend, mother of his one-year old son, who he had left to enter a relationship with me one year

²⁰ Her name is altered



prior to my fieldwork. The woman had tried to establish mediation with her former boy-friend through *shemagele*²¹, a traditional institution of mediation to solve conflicts between people, to get him back. He had refused. I learned that she approached those who were considered my friends in the market town, circulating false rumours about her former boy-friend, thereby challenging my confidence in him to undermine our relation. When he confronted her about it she confessed she wanted to disturb me.

In fear of potential poisoning, my husband's family advised him to stop eating food in his former girl-friend's house while he delivered his monthly financial contribution for his son. He said we both had to be careful about where and with whom we ate for this same reason; people might be jealous of our relationship. That such poisonings actually happen was confirmed, when in the middle of May 2002 the radio brought news about a *teskar*, a commemoration gathering in Tigray where ten people had died of poisoning and many more were hospitalised.²² The custom of the cook tasting the food before she serves it points likewise to this fear of poisoning. I had observed how the woman who brought food to the guards in Kisadgaba²³ prison took a mouthful from both batches before handing them over. Poisoning is perceived as a potential threat related to jealousy. Kidane²⁴ (20) who has been a reliable friend since he was thirteen and had followed me around to different villages in the rural area, says it is first and foremost a women's strategy, as men would rather turn to physical violence. My husband told me again and again to take care, and not walk alone on foot to his village, an advice I chose not to follow to prevent myself from becoming completely paranoid. When I discussed my experiences with a woman I had known since my first visit to the market town, she merely said that now I know how *Habesha*²⁵ are. She said, "*yq'ennu*", 'they are jealous'. Our own relationship was later cooling, as I had moved a lot of attention to my husband and his family. "*Feqh'ri t'odiyu*, love is over" she said when she got to know I had come back from a rural village one day earlier without visiting her on my arrival.

²¹ This traditional institution of mediation exists alongside the legal juridical institutions in Ethiopia. Conflicts between people are first tried solved with this traditional system, but will be taken over by the state system if the mediators do not succeed. *Shemagele*, literally an elder was traditionally older men, but today any adult person, man or woman, who is trusted and believed to be wise, can enter this position in relation to a specific case.

²² Such incidents would most often result from inter- or intrafamily conflicts, but in this instance I heard it interpreted by locals according to the political context of the post-war situation with Eritrea, and taken to be Eritrean infiltrators perpetuating acts of terror in Tigray.

²³ A small market town approx. 25-30 km to the north-west from Shire/Endaselassie.

²⁴ Recorded interview 23rd September, 2002. His name is altered.

²⁵ Highland Ethiopians often use the term *Habesha* about themselves. *Habesha* refers to the Arabic emigrants, *Habeshat* venturing from Yemen to Africa around 2000 B.C. Abyssinia is derived from *Habashat*, and was used about the pre-modern state that comprised of highland Ethiopia and Eritrea.



I see this positioning as an actor in the field, as a method of *interference*. As a photographer and partner of one of their locals, I had my own, sometimes conflicting interests. If I confronted them, it was by trying to be clear about my own opinions and about my own feelings. That I sometimes chose to reveal my own emotions from tears to anger in different situations, constituted me as a person they could relate to, though not necessarily always understand, even not necessary like. Potentially it would clarify their positioning as well. As under-communication and manipulation of information is a common social strategy, a point I will return to, I came to reckon this a useful tool, in addition to being a patient listener in the first place, to be able to grasp the multilayered feature of social interaction. This way of situating my research also moves comparison from a situation at the scientist's worktable, to *practise*.

However, I think it is important to return again and again to questions on knowledge and scientific truth(s). According to D.A. Masola the concept of truth does not make much sense when separated from the subject, which "actually does determine what is true and what is not at any given time and place" (Masola 1994: 209). This subjective positioning as a researcher might be easier to claim after having endured the post-modern era, since it opened up for the possibility of multiple truths. I likewise find Haraway's concept 'situated knowledges' (Haraway 1988: 581) in her feminist terminology useful, because it allows for a subjective space for objective knowledge. She states,

"only partial perspective promises objective vision. All cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledges, not transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (Haraway 1988: 583).

As the examples below will show, consorting to the research practice of participant observation certainly had its subjective and emotional aspects. In my experience, it is precisely in the tension that prevails in the practical as well as analytical handling of reality, allowing for both emotion and rationality, subjectivity and objectivity, that knowledges reside.

Participant observation in practice

Because I was a *ferenji*, white foreigner, I was seen as unable to take part in and learn Tigrayan practices. My argument that I like to work was not easily understood when hard physical labour is synonymous with poverty, and not being able to pay somebody else to do the job. The western concept of work as a value in itself, cannot be used when physical work is seen as a mere necessity implicating low social status. Since sitting down too much just chatting gives me the itch, the fact that I was denied access put me through a range of emotions, from regret to anger. When Kidane was building his new house, a *gidgida* type of wood and clay, I hoped to take part in the process. When it was time to work the clay walls, which is women's work, unless paid male labour is used, I arranged with him to participate the next two days. I



Hedmo interiors in a rural village. Note how shelves have been built into the walls, and the sparse display of material things. Most of the objects have primarily a practical utility and are produced within the household with straw or calabash. Note also how the upper part of the wall is decorated.

Right: The two pictures show a kitchen section; with the conical lid, the *megogo*, the baking stove for *injerra*.

Far right: A detail from the kitchen storage room with a few purchased utensils of glass, metal or plastic. September 2002.

had not reckoned on his mother who was not happy at all about the arrangement, and tried all different arguments to chase me away; everything from that I would spoil my clothes and my hands – but so did they – to saying that “*ferenjis* cannot work with clay, they can only work with cement.” We had a quarrel where I refused to leave; she had not reckoned on my stubbornness and gave in, possibly hoping I would get tired quickly and leave anyway. People came and went to see how we progressed, commenting on the white labour force she had attracted. When we reached lunchtime I asked her, “*h’afirki do?*” if she was embarrassed? She confirmed she was, probably deadly. I will not deny it was hard work, mixing clay and straw with water to the right consistence and throwing it onto the wooden scaffolding with force and precision. Taking time stretching out the different muscles after work, I was probably better off than Kidane’s mother, who turned up the next day with an aching body, while his sister did not turn up at all.

The same kind of attitude was revealed when I started venturing to rural villages on foot, staying from one to two weeks at a time; I was told I could not possibly do it. *Ferenjis* go by car, and when there is no road for a car, it means white people cannot go. The other reasons they gave me were that it was too far, too strong sun and too hot, malaria and *eshokh*, thorns. Anyway I went; walking for up to three hours at a time was not beyond my capacity, even with a backpack, if I started off in the cool morning at around 6 o’clock. I also arranged with local farmers, returning from the market town to their rural villages, to take my food provisions on their donkeys when I was staying for longer periods at a time. However I do not think I managed to change their stereotyped image of *ferenjis*, because I was seen as an exception: “You are a *Tigrawiti*, Tigrayan, or a *tegadalit*, fighter woman,” I was told.

I have pondered quite a lot on their attitudes towards me and discussed it with my Tigrayan husband. The most relevant answer I think is that they feel responsible for me as a guest. Instead of teaching me about challenges and dangers in the environment, they think I am better off staying at home drinking coffee; at least then they feel in control. I guess the fact that I was a *ferenji* woman, believed to be fragile, did not support my case. My otherness was understood as implicating certain inherent qualities, meaning that a *ferenji* cannot just learn Tigrayan practices and way of life. My suggestion is that this issue is also about identity. Most people live hard lives dependent on a harsh and often unpredictable environment. They manage somehow, most of the time. This managing harbours pride that might be belittled if somebody from the outside comes in and manages too; by denying me participation they reassured their own identity. This is confirmed by the way they explained my behaviour when coping, that I must be a *Tigrawiti* after all. The important point for my discussion is that practise is not only involved in the reproduction of norm, but has implications for identity, an issue I will return to in chapters 4 and 5.

On occasions where I saw no point in arguing, I used their aversion towards my participation to negotiate photographing them while they worked. Generally, people do not like to be photographed off guard and in their working-clothes. I gave them the option between evils



on telling them, “either I work, or I photograph”, and they would accept to be photographed; occasionally straightening their backs posing. I must admit I have likewise taken advantage of their attitude towards me as a *ferenji*, when there were things I did not want to do, because they so readily would excuse my behaviour as *ferenji* behaviour. My own strategy could be an illustration on how individual actors, including the researcher, must be seen as selective in their choices, and taking advantage of possible coexisting identities and ambiguity in different situations.

In this chapter I have located my field in the region as well as suggested the ‘field’ as a situation in time and space. I have presented my positioning as a researcher and argued for a more interfering role as an actor in order to understand a different cultural context than my own. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on Tigrayans’ self-presentations and self-representations to establish a context for understanding individual agency.

Chapter 2

REPRESENTATION, SELF-PRESENTATION: A SITUATION

Self-presentation and self-representation in the Tigrayan context could be understood to imply political as well as social considerations. This fact is manifested in the cultural practice of *q'iné*, words and expressions with layered meanings. To give a simple example of *q'iné* I will tell you a riddle that the children used to shout after me. It goes like this: “Thera, Thera, *maq'ora hat'ira*”, which means ‘Thera has a big bump’. At first I thought the riddle was rather sweet since I had lost too much weight during my fieldwork, until somebody told me it could be interpreted as a *q'iné*, taking on the opposite meaning. Thus, that my bump was diminishing could be understood as a sign that I was leading a too active sex-life than could be considered proper, indicating that I was a person with low morals. I guess my past, dancing and drinking in one of the market town’s *bunabéts*, did not work to my advantage in this respect; women frequenting a *bunabét* risk being classified as *shermut'a*, prostitutes.

The *q'iné* has traditionally been used to imply something politically dangerous or otherwise offensive without saying it directly. Thus the important point for my discussion is that this cultural practice implicates a skilful layering of information in social interaction. Manipulation of information can be understood as a culturally based social strategy to create ambiguity, and hence spaces for agency to exceed political constraints as well as cultural norms. I think it is important to emphasise this general oral skill of Tigrayan actors, and likewise the importance of narration in social interaction as the following discussion is primarily centred on what aspects tend to be under-communicated. That painful, personal experience are left out does not mean other experiences cannot be transformed into a good story, to be told at the coffee ceremony, or other social events; nor does it prevent people from talking about or ridiculing others.

Before I proceed, I also consider it important to emphasise that I never reached a state during my fieldwork where I could claim to fulfil the anthropological research ideal of constituting a blank slate. Hence, I see Unni Wikan’s (1993) use of ‘resonance’ as more in tune with my own experience, even if the level of resonance is bound to differ in different situations with different people present. Wikan’s argument is that resonance, which she sees as requiring the fusion of feeling and thought, is what “evokes shared human experience” (Wikan 1993: 208), and thereby prepares the ground for transmission of meaning. She explains resonance as that which “fosters compassion and empathy; it enables appreciation; without resonance, ideas and understandings will not spring alive” (Wikan 1993: 194). Further, in my opinion an important point is that resonance goes beyond a subject-object situation, and requires interacting subjects.

Resonance also allows the use of subjectivity, for using the self as both an emotional and rational being towards the understanding of others. Thus resonance became one strategy of finding my way through layered communication.

Personal experiences; memories

That Tigrayans might have experienced several famines and wars in their environment is a fact that was seldom talked about, at least not in my presence; unless I asked. However, their stories tended to be represented as mere matter of facts. *Aboy* Haddish (90)¹, *ato* or *aboy*, 'mister' and 'my father', being respectful ways of addressing elder men, says: "I was with the Italians. I was a soldier for five years. Then there were fightings with the English and the Italians at [Amba] Allage, "the English won over us. ... We stayed altogether two years with the British. Then Emperor Haile Selassie appealed for our release. If he had not, we would have been fighting against the Germans [WW2]. Instead we were allowed to return home." Of his eight children, two have died; one son and one daughter were fighters during the Tigrayan revolution.

The life-experiences of the younger generation also relate to historical events in the region. Kidane² (20), a high-school student and self-taught handyman in the market town, was three years old when the big famine raged in 1977 E.C. (1984-85)³. He has been told they were not starving. His mother's family had enough grain to take them through. "I was a child," he says when I ask him about the Tigrayan revolution and the struggle against the *Derg*. Kidane says he remembers occasions of fighting in the market town; he remembers the fright. Old military wrecks still litter the sides of the road from the market town Endabaguna to Shire/Endaselassie, serving as memorials from the final battles⁴ that liberated the entire Tigray region. Kidane knows very well the story about how the *Derg's* retreating forces in 1981 E.C. (1988) were ambushed a couple of kilometres outside the market town; only the *Derg's* general escaped with two vehicles. During the Tigrayan struggle the *Derg* had controlled Shire/Endaselassie

¹ Recorded interview 11th October 2002. His name is altered. Because of his age and health condition I interviewed him in his home with other family members present. All age specifications in this thesis must be understood as estimates.

² Recorded interview 23rd September 2002. His name is altered.

³ E.C. designates the official Ethiopian calendar, followed by the Gregorian calendar in brackets. I use the Ethiopian calendar when this is used by interviewees; otherwise I use the western Gregorian calendar. The difference between the two calendars is explained in Ethiopian folklore as the time it took for the message about the birth of Jesus to reach Ethiopia; seven years, eight months and ten days.

⁴ TPLF - Tigray People's Liberation Front, managed to capture Shire/Endaselassie and all the major towns in Tigray (except for Mekelle, the capital city of the region) in the beginning of 1988, but retreated as *Derg* forces counterattacked a few months later. The garrison in Shire/Endaselassie was a key to the *Derg* regime's hold on western and central Tigray. All the towns in Tigray were recaptured by TPLF by the end of February 1989. The final defeat of the 35,000 man strong garrison in Shire/Endaselassie on 19th February sent shockwaves through the remaining *Derg* forces which abandoned Tigray within a couple of weeks. TPLF entered Mekelle without a fight (Young 1977).



Walking alone down by the river I suddenly heard somebody shouting at the top of the hill, signalling me to wait. A young boy was eagerly running down the steep ascent. When he came closer I saw that it was Asheber, the deaf boy in the market town. He was holding a bouquet of red bougainvilleas and communicated that he wanted me to photograph him; which I did. He had his new suit on, made by a local tailor. The next year I brought his picture; he was smiling happily. But one representative of the local administration also saw the picture and was not all that happy about it. I was questioned about my purpose of photographing poor children. I explained to him that maybe the boy is poor, but to me he is not looking particularly poor in the picture, and that, as a matter of fact, not everything about the boy's background can be read from this particular photograph. March 1996.

together with all the other major towns in Tigray, while the rural areas, as well as Endabaguna were held by *Weyane*⁵ - TPLF. These *Weyane*-controlled areas were occasionally raided by *banda*, smaller groups of infiltrators trained by the *Derg* to perpetrate acts of terror, or bombed from the air, as was the market town. Kidane was nine years old when the *Weyane* seized power in Ethiopia in 1991. He started school the year after. He was again confronted with war when the Eritrean-Ethiopian war erupted in 1998. Even if the Ethiopian Government claimed that enrolment into the army was done on a voluntary basis, this does not mean that there were not certain pressures at play. Kidane tells how officials came to the high-school in the market town. There was a meeting with all the students the first day. The next day only the male students were present and encouraged to enlist. He says they were told, "other people are dying [for the country] while you are studying." Kidane argued that as the breadwinner for his mother and younger siblings; how could he possibly go? Instead he took off to his father's rural village for a while, till the matter had calmed down.

Rahwa⁶ (18), who grew up in a rural village three hours walk from the market town, remembers the sound of shooting during the revolution, "there were fighters, there were *shifta*, outlaws," she says. "The latter demanded money. If they did not get it they would shoot people. Sometimes *banda* would come from Shire. We hid in *gudgwad*, holes, if the MIGs came, or in *bati*, caves. The *banda* killed people, took their animals and set peoples' houses on fire. I was a child, I was afraid. But the *Weyane* would come and chase them away," Rahwa concludes. When the war with Eritrea raged (1998-2000), they could hear the bombing 100 kilometres away. In Rahwa's village fifty-five men joined the Ethiopian army during the border war. Seven did not return. The four and seven years old sisters, who are Rahwa's neighbours in the village, were not the only children who lost their father.⁷

While acknowledging personal experiences, I think it is important to have in mind that both personal and collective memories, according to Steven Robins, are "unstable, suffer the degradation of time, the pressures of the present and are often subject to self-serving revision

⁵ The term 'Weyane' in popular use is interpreted as 'revolution', and refers to TPLF. The contemporary revolutionary history of Tigray started with the *kedamay Weyane*, 'first Weyane', and refers to the peasant uprising in the early 1940's against Emperor Haile Selassie. In 1943 Emperor Haile Selassie sent a large army to stop the riot, and assisted by the British Royal Air Force essential areas in eastern Tigray were bombed (Hammond 1999: 252); a revolt against the centralised state was quenched. The *kalay Weyane*, 'second Weyane' refers to the Tigrayan revolution 1975-1991. 'Weyane' is also used about the present TPLF-dominated EPRDF government, bearing negative connotation for those who do not support their rule. The *salsay Weyane*, 'third Weyane' refers, following Tronvoll (2003), to opposition within TPLF.

⁶ Recorded interview 9th October, 2002. Her name is altered.

⁷ Both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments have been restrictive in releasing official numbers of deaths from the border war for political reasons. Kjetil Tronvoll (2003) presents an unofficial estimate of casualties based on sources close to the military high command claiming as many as 160.000 Ethiopians died in the war with Eritrea. Similar estimates for the Eritreans are 40-50.000.

and manipulation as well as forgetting, silence, denials, and repression that traumas produce” (Robins 1998: 125). This said; memories are believed to be one constituent of personal as well as collective identities. In the following I will discuss some aspects of this issue in the Tigrayan context.

Collective experiences and Tigrayan identity

In addition to recurring droughts and recent wars, there is no doubt that for a majority of Tigrayans life in general is harsh, comprising of hard physical work, a high prevalence of diseases such as TB and malaria and an increasing challenge from Aids⁸; and not least, poverty. According to the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), 57,9 % of the population in Tigray are estimated to live in absolute poverty, with a further 39,3 % living in relative poverty, placing Tigrayans in the global category of ‘poorest of the poor’.⁹

To give a picture of the challenges people have faced, and to different degrees still face, Jenny Hammond (1999), in her book *Fire from the Ashes. A chronicle of the Revolution in Tigray, Ethiopia, 1975-1991*, points to the fact that the Tigrayan people know all about,

“absence, separations, partings, migrations, exile, roving in search of seasonal work, children as servants of the better-off, girl children farmed out in forced marriages, death from hunger, death from disease, death from bombardments, and in battles; [t]he effects of poverty and continual conflict” (Hammond 1999: 236).

In the period from 1889 till 1997, Young (1997) gives an estimate of seventeen famines having struck Tigray, the biggest being in 1958-9, 1965-6, 1972-4 and 1984-5. Likewise, some twenty major battles were fought on Tigrayan soil only between the battle of Adwa in 1896, where the Italians were defeated and forced to retreat, and the Italian re-invasion of Ethiopia in 1935; the different battles concerned with fending off, not just external forces, but managing internal regional and national power struggles as well. Within the historical context of wars and shifting alliances, being *Tigraway*, Tigrayan, bears proud connotations to *h’abbo*, “which refers to Tigrayans’ determination, integrity, and desire for revenge in the face of injustice, characteristics the Amharas were held not to possess” (C. Rosen in Young 1997: 74). As for the similarities between these two major ethnic groups of highland Ethiopia, Levine states that “the two groups share the legacy of Axum, the Ethiopian alphabet, *Geez* literature, Monophysite Christianity,

⁸ In an interview June 2002, Mother & Child Expert Ato Mengesha Worku at the Wereda Health Office in Shire/ Endaselassie, made an unofficial estimate of 2-4 people dying of Aids every day in Shire town only. There are no exact numbers available for Tigray, basically because, as I was told at the Regional Health Office in Mekelle, till recently there has not been a specific statistic category for the hospitals to register Aids-related deaths. However, the epidemic is believed to be on an increase not least because of the war with Eritrea and soldiers from all parts of Ethiopia having joined the army to fight in Tigray, followed by a significant increase in prostitution. According to UNAIDS numbers on Ethiopia in general, 5000 people are believed to be infected every week, an estimate of 3 million are infected and 1 million children orphaned ([http:// www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org)).

⁹ www.u-fondet.no

Aboy Asfaha posing with his wife Mearey; photographed when I first got to know them in February 2001. When they saw the photograph *aboy* Asfaha commented that they looked like Muslims because of the clothes hanging on the wall behind them (they are Orthodox Christians). Far right: When I photographed them again in August 2002, they made sure they were situated in a more 'favourable' setting.

similar political and social institutions, and the same style of life. One would be justified in treating their traditional Abyssinian culture as a unity" (Levine 1967: 2). My suggestion is that this could be a valid starting point even today, but will add that I think the main opposition between the two groups resides in the quest for political hegemony. Although Tigrayans and Amharas are closely related ethnically, linguistically and culturally, this relationship has been marked by political rivalry since Amhara kings made claims to the restored 'Salomonic line of succession'¹⁰ after Tigrayan and Amhara forces overthrew the Zagwe dynasty in 1270 A.D. (Young 1977). This rivalry culminated in the Tigrayan revolution where the *Derg* were seen as just another expression of the Amhara's oppressive rule over the people of the Tigray region. Efforts had begun in the Middle Ages and continued through Haile Selassie and the *Derg* to centralise state powers by weakening political and cultural influences in the periphery. However, Young points to a fact often under-communicated that,

"it speaks of the prevalence of national sentiments in Tigray that, in spite of its increased marginalisation in an empire dominated by Amharas (...), it was the only province able to maintain a measure of political autonomy and be ruled by members of its own nobility prior to the [Ethiopian] revolution of 1974" (Young 1997: 30).

After power relation had shifted and the TPLF-dominated coalition EPRDF¹¹ ruled the nation, the Tigrayan-Amhara opposition took yet another turn with the Eritrean-Ethiopian war starting in May 1998. Kjetil Tronvoll suggests that people of highland Ethiopia, have "an inbuilt notion of and drive towards alliance-building (...) a socio-cultural inclination towards making and re-making alliances" (Tronvoll 2003: 116-8). That Tigrayans and Amharas joined forces to fend off what was felt as a blow to Ethiopian national integrity can therefore be interpreted as just a logical consequence of this socio-historically based drive. Further, Tronvoll's argument makes it possible to see mobility and alliance-building as inherent in Tigrayan social practise and embodied as an individual potential.

However, in spite of shifting alliances, the question is if these collective experiences¹² of war, suffering and trauma, can be seen as having created a feeling of communality through

¹⁰ This restoration found its mythic base in the asserted union between Queen of Saba (Makeda) and the biblical King Salomon resulting in the birth of their son, Menelik I. The epic *Kebre Negast*, The Glory of the Kings, was produced as a genealogy to ascertain this union and its successors. Forming a master narrative, it created a strong base for Ethiopian national identity based on Christian highland culture. Following Harold G. Marcus in *A History of Ethiopia*, "[Highland] Ethiopians became the chosen people, an honour reinforced by their acceptance of Christianity. The *Kebre Negast* is thus a national epic that glorifies a particular monarchical line and tradition (...). The epic sought to arouse patriotic feelings of uniqueness, to glorify Ethiopia, and to provide a proud identity" (Marcus 1994: 18-9).

¹¹ Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

¹² It is estimated that the death toll in Ethiopia (1961-1991) related to resistance war, terror, famine, war/famine-related epidemics, resettlement and villagisation programmes is between 1.7-2.6 million people (Gebreab Barnabas in Tronvoll 2003: 155).



a Turnerian *communitas*, or what Liisa H. Malkki calls “accidental communities of shared memory” (Malkki 1997: 92), and thereby moulding a specific Tigrayan identity? I cannot say it has not; the shared pride of having won the revolutionary struggle against the *Derg* is still significant. However, my impression is that Tigrayans would usually use the term *Habesha* about themselves; referring to the Abyssinian people of the highland areas of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and as such implicitly including both Tigrayans and Amharas, and Eritreans; thus holding onto a shared past separated from recent heartbreaking challenges. From this point of view, the most obvious expression of shared traumatic experiences seems to be silence.

Silenced stories

The above-mentioned collective, as well as personal experiences are not what most Tigrayans highlight in daily life situations. Likewise, the self-presentation usually displayed is of the happy, hospitable and sociable person. If I had come for just a short visit without knowing anything about what the people have been living through, I would have thought they had always been happy and gay; poor, but seemingly chatty, cheerful and laughing most of the time. As a visitor and guest I have been overwhelmed by their openness and generosity. “*Etowi geza!* Get inside!” I cannot count all the times people I have not even met before, have invited me home for coffee.

There are no obvious signs of their past suffering in how people behave in their daily lives, and in what they choose to talk about; unless I ask them in private. “*Ayzareben*, they do not talk,” Kedist¹³ (32) a widow and mother of three, confirms quietly; “about the famine in 1977 E.C. (1984-85), about people dying on the road, about children left behind when parents went to Sudan.” Kedist and her family were in the western lowlands in Tigray; she assures me they did not starve. They had enough grain, all their cows, milk; her father was alive, then. “We were fine,” she says and adds: “about hardship, I do not know much about hardship.” About her own sorrow after her husband’s death she keeps quiet. She says she has no close friends in the market town other than her brothers and sisters, whom she trusts and tells about her inner feelings. “There is a lot of bad gossiping. Therefore *ane suqh’ ile*, I keep quiet,” she says. After the time for collective expression of sorrow, *h’azen*, usually between seven to twelve days, and the *teskar*, the commemoration gathering usually after forty days are over; her worries are shared with her closest family only. Her tears are shed at home, alone.

Kedist was a *shig Weyanit*, meaning ‘a torch for the revolution’, assisting in the organising and the political education of the people of Tigray. She says she has no education, but when I ask her again she admits she has finished third grade. Later she had three months political education with the *Weyane*. She was a *derafit*, a singer at the time. When I ask: “what

¹³ Recorded interview 17th October, 2002. Her name is altered.



about now"? She says with a laugh: "I do not sing anymore". When I say I would have liked to hear her sing, she starts to sing one of the songs she sang at special occasions and celebrations during the struggle. This particular one is about a man who was killed by the *Derg*; his son asks his mother. Kedist sings. "Tell me my mother, where did my father go? I want to know the truth. Where did he go?" His mother answers; Kedist explains, and sings again. "Do not disturb me. Do not ask me again. Do not talk about it; they [the *Derg*] could find you. Take your water and your food and go [to work]. Do not talk about it; they could find you." The son keeps on asking though, and in the end she tells him that his father is dead. The boy finds his father's shoes and gun, leaves home and joins the struggle; thus in a true Tigrayan *h'abbo*-style embodies courage and bravery to revenge his father.

Kedist confirmed my own impression that much of what are personal experiences are imperatively kept away from a public gaze, not least a photographic one. The song is likewise an example of how things might be kept a secret even between family members for the reason that it is considered too painful to know. From his research in Ethiopia and Tigray, Tronvoll differentiates the following sentiments that silence has the possibility to communicate; "sorrow / sadness; fear / apprehension; shock / inaction; uncertainty / insecurity; ignorance / unawareness; and uncooperativeness / opposition" (Tronvoll 2003: 90). Silence from this point of view, is not only absence of communication or even an inability to communicate; it is a strategy to protect, as well as a potential political strategy. Even if atrocities committed against the Tigrayan people could be classified as a collective experience, the individual is still left with her personal feelings and interpretation of the events, and thus has different reasons to speak out, or remain silent. And, as Valentine Daniel (1996) emphasises when talking about the speechlessness following extreme pain as in torture that at "this level of experiencing pain it appears that one is unlikely to find any significant effect of culture. (...) Pain's privatization becomes absolute" (Daniel 1996: 142-3).

There is no doubt that the historical context in Tigray implicates moments that have been experienced as extremely painful. "*Ane suqh' ile*" an expression used to say 'I keep quiet', can also signify a resigned, but dignified containment of what challenges life might have brought my way.

The biographic narrative in flux

Within psychotherapy and trauma management narration has been applied as a method to restore the self after shattering experiences. In Tigray, it is primarily the institutionalised funeral ritual and the subsequent *h'azen*, the mourning after a death that allows space for expression of painful experiences. During the funeral and the mourning in the deceased's home for up to twelve days afterwards, the 'telling' is performed like 'singing-crying', and thus relates to the traditional funeral poems or orations, *melq'es* conducted by skilled professionals to give expression to pain. However, after the mourning period is over, and an eventual restoration

Haleq'a Tsegay, a deacon with his wife Workey posing on the roof of *aboy* Asfaha's *h'edmo* one Sunday. There were a lot of people present at the time, and when *haleq'a* Tsegay puts his hand on his wife's shoulder, they urge him to go on and put his arm around her. Instead he instantly withdraws his hand, and they pose together as man and wife would usually do; without showing obvious signs of affection.

of the self through prayer and the Orthodox priests blessing with *may degam*, holy water have been carried out, precisely the avoidance of telling seems to be a relevant strategy to be able to go on. Thus containment of what remains of painful emotions is a pre-condition to be able to maintain the self, and likewise, failure to do so is interpreted as foolishness.

When I as a foreigner and outsider was given access to certain sequences of their life-stories, thus implicitly what is considered 'telling' events, it might be because I did not comply with the cultural norm of avoidance and actually asked, and not least important, was willing to listen. Due to my otherness I was probably presumed to be lacking the cultural skill of taking advantage of and dispersing biographic information in social interaction. Before I understood it was inappropriate, I had been asking people about their lives while situated in a variety of social contexts and been presented different versions. However, it made me aware of the flexible character of the narrative itself, as the following example suggests.

I had made an appointment with *aboy* Tadesse¹⁴ (78) to photograph his youngest daughter that had just given birth to her first-born. Since he had already told me that he had been married three times, and he had told me his wives' names and all his children's names, I realised that this girl's mother might have been yet another intimate relation he had not told me about. When I asked him about it to make sure I had understood him right, he said: "Oh, you have been investigating on your own," and then, "it is a secret," clapping his hand towards his lips. Later when I brought up the issue again¹⁵, he denied any sexual relation to the girl's mother, even if her two youngest daughters both called him father. However, *eza gwaley* or *eze wedey* are used by parents about a beloved daughter or son, but can also be used for a child you really like, but is not yours by birth. The most central persons in a child's life might be people other than their biological parents, since growing up with other relatives is not uncommon. He said, "it's *feqh'ri*, love," while holding his hand to his heart. To explain his relation to the girl's mother, he says she is like a beloved sister; implicitly emphasising their relation would be incestuous if sexual. I never got to know the 'true' version of his story, which is not my point anyway, only an attempt to understand the perceived reason(s) for the necessity to change it.

The dispersing of information, including gossiping, as well as holding back, manipulation and layering of information, could be interpreted as handling 'symbolic capital' in social interaction. The reason why I think this is a useful perspective was implicitly revealed to me by my husband's former girl-friend. The way she distributed rumours and false information about my husband within my personal social network was not a very pleasant experience, but instructive indeed for my research. Likewise, the stories distributed about you and your life might become hot stuff in the *sewabét*, beer houses, and served as bittersweet treats at the coffee ceremony. When Abeba was beaten up by her husband she continued her normal, daily

¹⁴ Recorded interview 24th September, 2002. His name is altered.

¹⁵ Recorded interview 10th October, 2002.



My impression is that people like to have a sense of control when being photographed, meaning that they most often would protest if photographed off guard; likewise to be photographed when working needs a bit of persuasion, if at all possible.

existence despite her swollen and blue face. “People would talk anyway,” she says, “there is no point in hiding.” I tell her that during the last ten days since she was beaten, people had been gossiping about her instead of me. My point gives her a good laugh. However, laying low for a while until the issue cools down seems to be the preferred strategy. This was the advice I was given if I complained about all the gossiping. “*Suqh’ belli!* Shut up! Keep quiet!” Likewise, I was advised not to show anybody what I felt, or that I was affected by it. People seemed to try keeping what was precious in their lives away from a public gaze as long as possible, making manipulation of information and fabricating ambiguity an inherent feature of self-presentation in social interaction.

‘Cards’ to be played

My point of departure was to see Tigrayan life-stories, according to Anthony Giddens (1991), as identity-forming biographic narratives. However, my empirical material made me realise that this was not as straightforward as it might sound. Giddens interprets the concept of ‘self-identity’ as “*the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*” (Giddens 1991: 53, *italics in original*). He goes on to say that self-identity is something that is produced and reproduced by the reflexive actor, and bound up in the biography she manages to provide about herself, as “[a] person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens 1991:54, *italics in original*).

In the following I will discuss what complicates Giddens’ particular interpretation of the biographic narrative as a ‘particular’ narration. My main objection is that it would not manage to incorporate a person’s need to change this narrative in shifting situations and different contexts. His interpretation is likewise problematic in contexts where biographic narratives are hardly shared, but kept as precious or traumatic private experience, shielded from an external view and the possibility of social sanctions. Thus, if the biographic narrative is understood as an exclusive internal feature of a reflexive person, it will turn out to have no analytic value in a social anthropological context. As Richard L. Ochberg remarks: “The story must, in some fashion, be told” (Ochberg 1994: 114). He goes on to say that “[m]ost of us tell our stories on rare occasions: in court, or in an employment interview, or perhaps on a first date, [or to the anthropologist] – and these hardly add up to a means of identity formation” (Ochberg 1994: 116). I would claim that such occasions are even rarer in the Tigrayan context, where there is a voiced mistrust as to how other people might choose to use your biographic information. This mistrust results in not just silence, but precisely the manipulation of narratives by producing ever-changing bits and pieces of stories as the case with *aboy* Tadesse above shows.



Zegwa (10) however, was not disturbed, absorbed as she was in the task of sowing *meshella*, sorghum. July 2001.

Exploring the reasons for the manipulation of biographic information, I realised the *debtera*¹⁶, a magician or sorcerer loosely connected to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, was one possible cause for concern. The *debtera* is believed to know about, and to be able to manipulate the powers of, both good and evil, hence making their connection to the Orthodox Church ambiguous and somewhat problematic. The *debtera* would use your biographic data, such as birth date, and your baptismal¹⁷ name given by a priest and usually kept secret in all circumstances other than within the church, to inflict illness or death. Referring to the believed powers of the *debtera*, one woman in her thirties said it would be foolish to reveal your birth date; most people would reduce their age by two to five years.

The same fear seems to prevail in relation to pregnancy. Knowing that a Tigrayan woman statistically would give birth to seven children¹⁸, it is amazing how few pregnant women you see around. As women usually do in Norway, I asked, “when are you going to give birth?” They would answer, “*gena*”, which means an unspecified ‘later’. One woman in the market town had answered *gena* for the last four months, and continued to do so for the next two months before she gave birth. Another pregnant woman in a rural village gave me the same answer over a period of several months. I asked her why she could not be more precise, and her brother who heard our conversation answered that she did not know. I found the answer not very likely since she had given birth to ten children already. So instead I suggested that she knew, but wanted to keep it a secret. She laughed. “Is it because you are afraid somebody or other, like the *debtera* would harm you,” I asked her. She looked at me, seemingly taken aback, and nodded. She later confirmed her fear of the *debtera*.

The *debtera* could be interpreted as symbolising the general mistrust within social relations, and likewise that this mistrust is reinforced by the discourse itself. My point is that this general mistrust influences how biographic information is handled in social interaction. Hence, I think it is important to incorporate the ambivalence involved in a narrated biography in the Tigrayan context, and possibly elsewhere, possibly everywhere; and avoid an interpretation of the biographic narrative as a particular identity-forming narration. As Max Gluckman points out, it is possible for individuals to “live coherent lives by situational selection from a medley of contradictory values, (...) beliefs, and varied interests and techniques” (Gluckman 1958: 26). This would further implicate that the ambivalence prevailing in self-representation is not necessarily shattering the individual’s feeling of self and identity. Henrietta Moore (1994) suggests that what holds these, as she calls ‘multiple subjectivities’, together to constitute an agent in the world are “the physical fact of being an embodied subject and the historical continuity of the

¹⁶ The Muslim equivalent is the *fukera*.

¹⁷ People’s official first name would be a different one, usually chosen later on.

¹⁸ According to *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia*, Tigrayan women bear 6,95 children; the country average is 6,74.

subject" (Moore 1994: 55), and likewise that past seems to hold preference over present, as Tigrayans' *Habesha* identity discussed above, is an example of.

When I ask *aboy* Tadesse to recapture his life-story without me asking questions, he asks "*kemey mu?* How? ... My story; from the beginning I was a farmer. It is a story about my wives and children dying. Now I am a *shemagele*, an elder; an old and poor man." When he says poor he hits his hand two times against the table. "What history is that?" he asks. "However, my story is a good story ... I do not know about lies and dishonesty ... I know people like me, young and old, men and women, I know it; they all call me *aboy*, my father," he says laughingly. When I turn off the tape-recorder he says, "and now I will ask you a question." He asks me to bring him a coat and a hat from Norway; in which case he will pray that I have a good and long life. His short summary tells me two things; one, that aside from the apparent inconsistency in his biographic narrative, he sees himself as an honest man, and secondly, he hopes to gain something from our relation. However, manipulation and layering of information is a possibility Tigrayans would take into consideration when interpreting communication. It is imperative both not to be cheated upon, or discovered as a cheater and classified as a *tenkolenya*. This term is ambiguous, because the practice is acknowledged as a social skill if the cheater is successful, meaning that the goal was attained and the cheating itself was not discovered by the affected people or institutions; otherwise it is condemned.

These empirical examples could be used to interpret self-presentation and self-representation as relating to personal/private versus social/public spheres as in Erving Goffman's (1959) conceptions of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. However, based in the practice of manipulating information in Tigrayan social interaction, and not least the cultural skill for layered communication, Goffman's dichotomy becomes in my opinion rather static; not least because it suggests an interpretation of 'backstage' as more genuine and authentic than 'frontstage'. To capture the fluidity and ambiguity inherent in self-presentation and thus the continuous identity management in play, I therefore find Richard Jenkins statement instructive when he disputes the divide between a personal and social identity, by saying that identity "is not 'just there', it must always be established. (...) Identity can in fact only be understood as process" (Jenkins 1996: 4). Likewise Liisa Malkki suggests that, "identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-constructing, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories" (Malkki 1992: 37). To establish and reinforce a subject position in social interaction must therefore be understood as an ongoing process. Information as 'symbolic capital' is one means to negotiate this positioning, "like 'cards' which each person will have to play carefully" (Storaas 1996: 250), making fluidity and flexibility the premise in social interaction.

My above discussion has been questioning the biographic narrative as a 'particular' narration, and its influence on the formation of self-identity as stated by Giddens (1991), not the relevance of life-stories in social anthropological research as such. Frode F. Jacobsen (1997)



Zagwa's mother Teberrih posing as she conducts the coffee ceremony, a gendered practice that reinforces culturally sanctioned womanhood in the Ethiopian highland context. July 2001.

suggests narratives as points of entry into cultural knowledge, not only based on what the stories explicitly tell, but due to what is excluded. The apparent absence in Tigray of narrative expression of painful experiences outside the institutionalised rites for mourning is a point in fact. From his research among the Beja nomads of the Sudan, Jacobsen suggests that, "the structural flexibility of Beja personal narratives allows for flexibility in the narrative structuring of reality of the Beja people" (Jacobsen 1997: ii). From this analytic point of view the flexible structuring of narratives in the Tigrayan context suggests that resilience is not just a subjective strategy, but a culturally based social strategy to be able to handle the particular circumstances of Tigrayans' life-situation.

Concerning the life-stories my discussing is concerned with, tendencies in the narratives identified as; the apparent absence of narrative expression of painful emotions; mobility and flexibility in the narratives and implications for social practice; and likewise personal experiences related to local discourse addressing an understanding of an embodied self, agency and causality. And, although biographic narratives are not always coherent, people manage sticking to a self-identity that is perceived both by themselves and others as somehow continuous. Likewise, I think it is essential to acknowledge non-verbal communication and the use of non-verbal signs, as well as the importance of practise in producing and reproducing identity. The photographic situation and the photographic representation itself is one possible non-verbal strategy that can be used for this particular purpose.

Self-presentation in front of the camera

The heritage from Goffman (1959) with his much-quoted view on selfhood as based in self-presentation sees the self, contrary to Giddens (1991) above, as basically attributed by that person's audience. His main point is that "this self itself does not derive from its processor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses" (Goffman 1959: 253). Goffman's self is a product of social interaction, not a cause of it. His 'performing self' is a strategic self, a rational actor bound up in what he sees as the structure of social interaction as a defined play or game. "The key factor in this structure is the maintenance of a single definition of the situation, this definition having to be expressed, and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude of potential disruptions" (Goffman 1959: 254). The performing self is no doubt an important aspect of personhood, but I think Goffman does not manage to incorporate fully the complexity of considerations at stake in self-presentation, a point I will return to. Thus his self becomes in my view, rather shallow; lacking flesh and blood so to speak. Jenkins points out that "if Goffman's self is merely its role-playing, then that self, such as it is, can *only* be social" (Jenkins 1996: 69). Likewise M. Hollis states that, "Goffman owes us a theory of self as subjects (...) to sustain an active base for social transactions" (Hollis in Jenkins 1994: 69).

Kahsay fought in Badme, in the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998-2000). He brings out his *kalashen* for the occasion.
 Right: Teberrih posing with her husband Kahsay. They have five children together.



Likewise, local discourse would instruct interpretations of self. However, this fact cannot be used to see cultural influences on the subjective individual actor as pre-determining her actions; as Henrietta Moore emphasises: “[t]he variations which exist in the understanding, definition and experience of the self, and the self’s relations with other selves and with the world, do not make the individuals concerned incapable of agency and intention” (Moore 1994: 34). My experience from Tigray of people’s eagerness and pride in being photographically represented, suggests that photography – if available – is one possible strategy put to use in the process of manifesting a sense of selfhood and identity.

In April 2002, I visited again a family that I had photographed while ploughing and sowing their *meshella*, sorghum fields during *keremti*, the rainy season the year before. I remembered them especially because their only daughter aged around ten at the time, even if they had sons, was allowed to sow the whole field. Her concentration had been remarkable, not allowing my crawling around taking photographs disturb her work. Sowing sorghum, maize and vegetables, when seeds are put more or less one by one into the soil in rows can be done by women. To sow the other main cereals *t’aff*¹⁹, a small-kernelled grass that is used for their staple food *injerra*²⁰, the sour-tasting pancake, and *dagusha*²¹, finger millet used for *sewa*, the local beer, is strictly a male task as the seeds are thrown out onto the field with force.

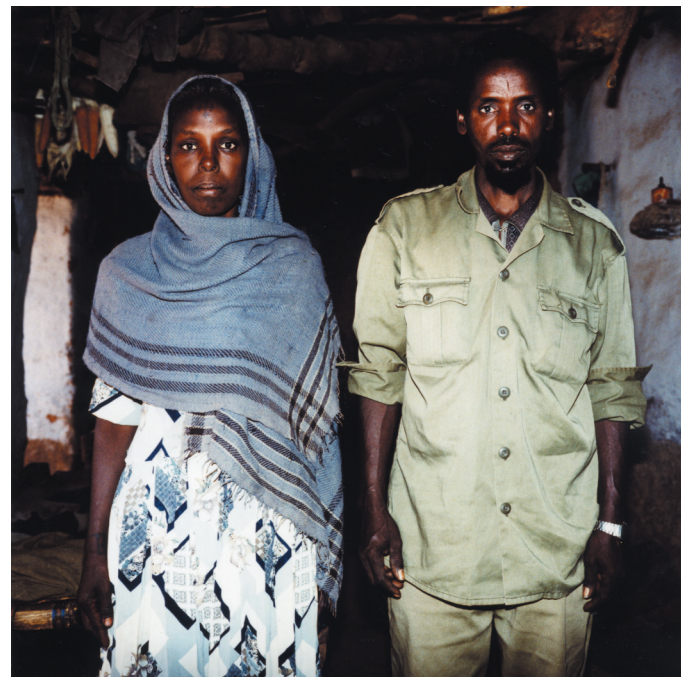
On that same occasion I had photographed her mother making coffee, her posture being humble, but confident, and with a goat resting under the bed behind her she represented in my opinion what could be interpreted as an archetypical womanhood based on Christian iconography. Now the woman starts commenting on the details in the picture, the old tin still used for water, the small coffee cups, *fenjal*, that was six at the time, now only four, two being broken, the colour of her shawl that last time was blue, now a more undefined greyish from wear, tear and washing, her dress once white now brownish like the soil they are living off.

Since her husband was not present in any of the previous photographs we decide to take new pictures. They start to arrange the coal stove with the coffee pot, the small stand with the coffee cups, the *injerra*-table and the green plastic jar filled with *sewa* in front of them. They are both changing their clothes; the woman to her newest dress, which she remarks is not new any more, her husband puts on his army-green suit. They place themselves side by side. He later adds his *kalashen*, a general name used for all semi-automatic guns similar to the Russian Kalashnikov, his ammunition belt with grenades and two extra bullet magazines from the last war with Eritrea. He poses beside her holding on to his weapon. He later adds his *kuta*, the thick,

¹⁹ Lat. *Eragrostis tef*

²⁰ Even if *injerra* preferably is made from *t’aff* it could also be made according to what cereals are available as sorghum, maize, finger-millet and wheat.

²¹ Lat. *Eleusine corocana*



white traditional cotton shawl used by men, she her *nets'ela*, the thin white traditional shawl used by women.

Seeing the efforts they put into the situation, to make what they saw as a desirable representation, was instructive; likewise the things they chose to include as cultural markers of identification. Their efforts also tell me that they are aware of what was at stake for them in this situation; that being represented is not just a matter of chance, but that they had to make sure it is done in a certain, preferable way, according to their own sense of identity. The situation also revealed how they chose to position themselves, not only towards me in a serious-looking frontal pose, but in relation to each other, side by side as a controlled situation based on a convention with its roots back to Victorian times in Europe when photography was still a new invention. At one point the man turns his back slightly to his wife, she still looks towards the camera; he looks out there somewhere. Their positioning emphasises the lack of obvious signs of affection between husband and wife, as would be the cultural norm in Ethiopia in general. When they include two of their younger children, they hold their arms around them. The man holds on to their youngest son, the woman to their only daughter, filling in the space between husband and wife.

Their pose also has its reference in the Ethiopian context. Following Richard Pankhurst (1992), emperors had, ever since photography was introduced in Ethiopia, been using the media to reassure their powers. Pankhurst says, referring to specific images meant to show the succession within the Ethiopian royalty, that "it shows the Ethiopian state's total assimilation of the medium. The sitters confront the camera with the steady gaze of authority and assurance – a self-presentation commanding the camera in the creation of a specifically controlled image" (Pankhurst 1992: 236). This conventional pose seems to be adapted by Ethiopian commoners as well. Likewise, most of the photographs in this thesis represent in my opinion precisely convention, and as such constitute an empirical base that to a certain degree contrasts individuals' life-stories, a point I will discuss in the next chapters.

Photographic situations and photographable situations

By using the concept 'photographic situation' I interpret this particular situation as a 'social situation' as identified by Gluckman (1958). My aim has been to observe how people use the photographic situation to present themselves as individuals both alone and in relation to others. It has likewise been instructive to see how people would take advantage of the photographic situation to stage a potentially ideal self-representation, as in the example above. However, I think it is important to make clear that the photographic situation is not identical with the photograph itself, because the situation includes more actors than those visible in the photographic image. The photographic situation includes at a minimum also the photographer, but more often a crowd that is eagerly instructing the person or persons how to pose, to be properly represented within local convention.



What is seen as a 'photographable' (Bourdieu 1990) situation likewise mirrors those aspects of life which are delegated cultural significance. In the Tigrayan context this would be celebrations like New Year in September; Christmas; *T'imq'at*, Jesus' baptism; Easter; *Guh'ariya*, commemoration of the disciples; *Mariyam*, Saint Mary and *Mesq'el*, recovery of the true Cross. Likewise there will be social gatherings in relation to *beal*, saints days every month, different ceremonies like baptism, marriage, *teskar*, commemoration gatherings, and *kusmi*, a yearly village church celebration, all with a connection to the Orthodox Church. People would probably choose one of these occasions to go to the local photographer, especially if new clothes have been acquired, or engage the local photographer to come to their home, if a photographer is available and if there are economic means to do so. However, being used to me hanging around photographing, I guess I have influenced what people perceived as photographable situations. The following story was recounted as an extraordinary situation that should have been photographed. One woman in a rural village tells me: "We were down at the *t'aff*-field when the rain came. There were four of us, three women and one man, who sought refuge from the rain under the big tree down by the river. When the lightning struck we all fell to the ground ... God hit us," she says. They immediately started to burry their hot bodies in the muddy soil, only their heads sticking up, to cool themselves down. The woman said she had told the others, "Thera should have been here now to photograph us."

Sarah Pink (1999) regards the "practice of photographing as a dynamic relationship between those who occupy the spaces on both sides of the viewfinder" (Pink 1999: 83), a relationship where who is holding the power is not pre-given, and where agency is not solely the privilege of the photographer. Her statement supports my view of photographing as a social situation, where negotiations are taking place and choices are being made accordingly. This kind of relationship, following Pink, blurs the considered necessary divide between the researcher and the researched, because what is observed is triggered by this very relationship itself. Since I have already based my thesis in a methodology of *interference*, this strategy became not an obstacle to overcome, but a logical consequence. I have also decided to take advantage of what Pink sees as a difficulty in using photographs as data, that they are too "enmeshed in social relationships and attempts at self-representation" (Pink 1999: 78). Instead I interpret photography precisely as a discursive social practise, involved in the negotiating of self-identity and a positioning within social relations. Therefore an important part of this project has been entering into dialogue to learn how individuals prefer to be represented. I have also learned more about what is not presented. "*Asha ferenji*. Stupid foreigner," one woman said when an Asiatic looking woman passing through the market town, was photographing a burial procession, an institutionalised space for the 'telling' of sorrow and pain. However, the following example shows that photographs can also play a role in restoring a self after shattering experiences when 'telling' is silenced.



Kahsay and Teberrih in different poses and attire. At some point Kahsay changes his *kalashen* with his walking stick making him look more like a village elder. The last photograph is with two of their youngest children, Zegwa and Shewit. April 2002.

I am on my way to Axum in Tigray by bus to develop films. The film-developing machine in Shire/Endaselassie is out of order. A man in military uniform, in his late forties I would guess, enters with his luggage, a bag, a sack, another bag with his kerosene cooker, an umbrella, a walking stick (he seems to have been wounded), and a golden picture frame with glass containing different photographs. A woman says goodbye and leaves. He sits down beside me, trying to find spaces to put down his things safely. I end up holding his picture frame, and since I have nothing else to do before the bus leaves, I end up studying the different photographs. I continue to hold the golden frame even after we have left the town. I start to ask him about the colour photograph of the two children, if they are his children. He says yes, and tells me he has fathered five. There are also two black and white photographs, one with two children, himself and a woman. He says his oldest daughter is in Addis Ababa, staying with relatives. Then he goes on to say that he has three children in Shire. I ask if he has fathered children with two different women. He laughs, seemingly a bit embarrassed. I know these are not questions considered appropriate to somebody you have just met, but I also know that I will probably never have the chance to ask him again. He confirms. "But," he adds, "my home is in Axum." He has been four years in Badme, serving in the Ethiopian Army during the Eritrean-Ethiopian war. "It was a hard time," he says, "four years are enough." The other black and white photograph is of himself with his brother in uniform and a cousin. He tells me his brother was a *tegadalay*, fighter for twelve years during the revolution. His brother's old ID is in the frame in addition to three photographs of the man himself taken during the war with Eritrea; the first in the camp exercising, a wooden rod is serving as the gun; the second with a soldier friend posing with communication equipment; the third with three friends, himself with a *kalashen* and ammunition hanging around his neck. I feel I am holding his life in my hands as the bus bounces along. After a while when he has managed to rearrange his luggage he takes the golden picture frame back. "It must not break," he says, as if his self was at stake.

Since photography has been an important part of my fieldwork methodology, I will use the space of the next chapter to discuss photography as a representational system, the use of photographs in social anthropological research in general, as well as preparing the ground for possible interpretations of the photographs in this thesis.

Chapter 3

PHOTOGRAPHY AS METHODOLOGY

Once in a while I went for walks outside the market town to get some rest away from people and photograph the landscape I have come to like so much. Maybe because my aim was privacy it made me notice people's presence.

In the shade of a small bush by the track are two young boys doing their school homework, having an aim similar to mine, I suppose, some peace and quiet to be able to concentrate. Further down the track are two men collecting big stones for building material. They load the stones into a device made of two halves of an oil drum, hinged together and mounted one on each side of some donkeys. Down at the bottom of the valley one man is tending to his banana trees grown with an irrigated water supply, which in any case is sparse in April during *h'agay*, the hottest season. There are women collecting firewood and carrying it on their backs in big bundles. There are men with donkeys taking goods to the market. We greet each other as we pass. They want to know where I am heading. I answer vaguely; knowing that everything I say will be distributed and thoroughly discussed. Then there are the shepherds; usually young children both girls and boys, but most of them boys. Some look like they are only four-five years old, not old enough yet to be given a pair of trousers, wearing only a shirt to cover the essential parts of their bodies. I ask one of them how old he is. He answers "*endey*", meaning, "I don't know". They will go on herding their family's animals while others of their age-group will be given the opportunity for schooling in the market town. On a similar walk in this landscape during *keremti*, the rainy season, I noticed how these youngsters were using slings throwing stones to keep birds and animals out of the peasants' fields. Since the shepherds were further up the hillside, and the stones were landing at the bottom where I was walking, I understood what a deadly weapon they owned if used with precision.

On one such occasion, when I decided to wash my hair in the clear river water, I realised on looking up that the young shepherds were all assembled on the other side of the river like a theatre audience, to watch the event. At the time I was not amused and tried to chase them away, which was impossible; they just stared back at this angry white creature that had entered their world. Walking up the hillside a little girl around seven-eight years old shouts up to me: "*salina*, photograph us." She shouts at the pitch of her voice, which is the village version of a mobile telephone. Long monotone sentences stretched out – sounding in my ears like a beautiful melody – carries the message a long way. I photograph the landscape knowing that from my point of view and distance, the people I met would not show in these pictures; neither would their sounds be heard.

I have told you this short story as an introduction to the general assumption that the photograph is a 'true' copy of the world. Below I will discuss photographic representation in general, and interpretations of photographic images more specifically.

Reality and represented reality

Photography as a representational system is based on the monocular, linear perspective, invented in the fifteenth-century and based on a geometric system for representing the seen world from a single viewpoint; "the eye of an individual human observer" (Batchen 1999: 108). Most commentators on photography see this invention as essential to the later development of the photographic medium. However, that we have learned to see photographs and other images based on the linear perspective as correctly representing the world is built on convention, and thus, does not imply an identical functioning of the eye and the camera lens.

Significantly however, it is not only a question of the discrepancy between what the photographic camera sees and my vision; it is also a question of how 'visuality' is established. Gillian Rose (2001) in *Visual Methodologies* explains vision as what the eye physiologically is capable of seeing; noting though, that these theories have changed historically and most probably will continue to do so. 'Visuality', on the other hand, refers to ways in which vision is constructed in various ways. In other words "how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein" (Foster in Rose 2001: 6). Here the important point is that interpretation of photographic images is based, not on physiological vision, but on 'visuality'; how we have learned to see, and thus what is 'seen' as significant and what is not. And, equally important, photographs would always allow for divergent interpretations, even if the photograph looks 'truthful'. This point can be exemplified with a quote from *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, where Bronislaw Malinowski (1935) in my opinion, accurately pinpoints this possibility for differing and even contradictory interpretations.

"Twelve people sitting round a mat in front of a house, because they came there by accident and stayed gossiping, have the same [visual] 'form' as the same twelve people collected on important garden business. As a cultural phenomenon, the two groups are as fundamentally separate as a war canoe from a sago spoon" (Malinowski 1935: 462).

Photography as social anthropological research method was further explicitly explored by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's (1962) in *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, from Bali 1936-39. Mead's claim to a "quantum leap in methodology" (H. Geertz 2000: 79), was based on the assumption that photography could be a powerful tool both for empirical discovery and for testing hypotheses. They were convinced that "[e]ach single photograph may be regarded as almost purely objective" (Bateson et al. 1962: 53), and that comparison of two or more photographs could lead to scientific generalisation. However, that using photography has its limitations is clearly revealed by their own comment that "[t]he photographic sequence is almost valueless without a verbal account of what occurred" (Bateson et al. 1962: 49).



Left: Zessen, a single mother and local shopkeeper. Right: how she wanted to be represented with her friend Atsede at the annual celebration at the monastery of Debre Abey in western Tigray on 21st of December (Ethiopian Calendar *T'asas* 12). A few thousand people were gathered; many of them had been staying at the church all night. Women are not admitted to the monastery, and a special church is built for them just outside the monastery compound. The head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the *patrarak*, Patriarch as well as *Papas*, bishops from different areas in Ethiopia had come for this occasion. When the *patrarak*, dressed in white, visited the women's church where I was present, people were jumping the wall surrounding the church; some of the wall even collapsed, to get a glimpse of him. Since I do not like big crowds where people are likely to start pushing, and where it is difficult to take a 'good' picture anyway, I did not take up my camera. When I returned to the market town I was asked if I had photographed the *patrarak*. When I said I had not, a man said: "*h'azine*, I'm sorry". By his look I knew I had made a huge mistake, and that I had not understood what the major event in this celebration was.

These examples on photographic representations and quotes from leading social anthropologists might shed some light on why still-photography to a large extent, has been excluded from the social anthropological project in spite of its initially believed truth-value as a representing medium. Likewise, Fredrik Barth (1981) claims that anthropologists should stick to what they are good at, namely participant observation to obtain appropriate anthropological data. His argument does not take into consideration the photographs potential as a narrative strategy to represent and communicate diverse realities in a form other than text. In my opinion there is no contradiction here, usually there is time to do both.

Photography as a representational system

As Terence Wright states: "The invention of photography during the early Nineteenth Century offered the promise of a truthful visual record that (it was assumed) did not rely upon human intervention" (Wright 1998: 211). This 'belief' made photography a potentially ideal and powerful tool in Positivist science' quest for truth in the service of mankind, as Positivism's main method of research was based on what was possible to experience and *see*, in reality, not on hidden metaphysical or other not verifiable causes.

At this point in history, which means most of the 19th century, missionaries, colonialists, photographers, and finally anthropologists, went to places that ordinary people could only dream of, and photographic images became important 'proofs' that these places and people actually existed. In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes states "in Photography I can never deny *that the thing has been there*", and he therefore categorises photography as 'that-has-been' (Barthes 1993: 76-7, *italics in original*). This suggests that whatever is photographed was indisputably there, independent of the photographed event's authenticity or possible constructed character. A troubling aspect of photography as 'that-has-been' – for those who want to use photography as a means of verification – is that this is perhaps the *only* thing that, with some certainty, can be deduced from a photograph, at least before digital photography entered the scene. Anthropologists and photographers alike have been trying to expand the scope of a possible photographic truth much further, ending up in what I have chosen to call 'the verification trap', because the only possible way out, at least for social anthropology, seems to have been to discard the use of still-photography altogether. Further, as social anthropology became more theoretically oriented, photography was not considered a useful tool in the search for hidden structures in human organisation, and written accounts were given priority over visual representation. As Barbra Wolbert puts it: "[a] shift from commented picture to illustrated text occurred" (Wolbert 2000: 323). And Christopher Pinney further comments that the "anthropologist has taken on to his own person the function of a plate of glass, or strip of film" (Pinney 1992: 82), and these embodied 'imprints' from the field were later developed to appropriate anthropological knowledge.



The post-modern debate concerning the ‘crisis of representation’ (Fischer et al. 1986) thoroughly addressed the reliability of representational systems in general and text in particular. “In this debate,” Wolbert states, “ethnographic photography, (...) did not receive the same kind of critical interest” (Wolbert 2000: 321), as did ethnographic writing or ‘writing culture’, even though the problem of representation concerns textual and visual media equally. The debates in the 1980’s and 90’s outside the field of social anthropology however, thoroughly addressed the issue of photographic representation. The debate, being both internationally and interdisciplinary situated, gained momentum as the possibilities for manipulation of the photographic image through digital means were generally acknowledged. Photographs could definitely no longer be trusted; the “death of photography” was announced (K. Robins in Wright 1998: 207). The irony is that photographic images, ever since photography’s birth, have been representing nothing but fragmented and subjective views of the world, photographs having always been interpretations of reality. This also shows how hard-lived the naive trust in “the idea of photography as an image-producing praxis free of value-judgements and rhetoric” (Bertelsen 1999: 89), is. The problems connected to representing the world through photographic images and films, resemble the problems of textual representations; the main problem, in my opinion, is precisely the truth discourse attached to the photographic medium in the first place.

Still-photography in anthropological research has, deprived of the supposed power to verify and the lack of a relevant discussion breaking new grounds, if not abandoned altogether, been doomed to a second-rate position in anthropological monographs as non-theorised visual representations. The question to be asked today therefore is; if photographs cannot be used as a means of verification, scientific or otherwise, how then can they be used in a scientific context to generate anthropological knowledge?

Photography as discourse

Even when taking as a starting-point, photographic representations’ fragmented and subjective character, I am still convinced photography has a position to claim in social anthropological research as a narrative strategy to represent empirical situations *differently* than text. In my opinion, it is not only a question of representational systems’ shortcomings, but equally the shrieking lack of analysis connected to anthropologists’ use of photographs in their research. According to Derrick Price and Liz Wells: “[a]ll discussions of photographs rest upon some notion of the nature of the photograph and how it acquires meaning. The issue is not whether theory is in play, but, rather, whether it is acknowledged” (Price et al. 1997: 37). I have already drawn attention to the space implicit in photographs for multiple interpretations. These interpretations could likewise be based on different theoretical frameworks as suggested by Rose (2001): compositional analysis, contents analysis, semiology, psychology, discourse analysis, and even the study of audiences.



Interpreting photographs from a discursive perspective has been a common strategy during the post-modern era. According to Rose, discourse analysis could be applied to explore “how images construct specific views of the social world. (...) [and] thus addresses questions of power/knowledge” (Rose 2001: 140-1). However, the issue is further, according to Jan-Erik Lundström (1993) that photography implicates not just one discourse, but many, possibly at the same time. Lundström emphasises that “[p]hotographs are incorporated into complex social and political networks where interpretations are produced, power exercised and status quo reproduced” (Lundström 1993: 15, *my translation from Swedish*). Leaning on Michel Foucault’s work, post-modern critics like John Tagg (1988) and Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1987), have addressed precisely the power structures photographic images can be made to confirm, and even enhance. As a medium without its own specific agenda, photography thereby lends itself to the user and the context it is applied to. One example of how photographic practice can be used to exercise power is implicit in Malinowski’s attitude as revealed in his *Diary* 1st December 1917, on approaching Kiriwina: “Photos. Feeling of ownership: It is I who will describe them or create them” (Malinowski 1967: 140). Likewise, Joanna C. Scherer reminds us of the fact that “[p]hotography was used extensively in the colonial effort to categorize, define, dominate and sometimes invent, an Other” (Scherer 1992: 33). The most intriguing interdisciplinary project between photography and anthropology materialised in the 1860’s, with the inventions by Henry Huxley and John Lamprey of different anthropometric methods (Spencer 1992). Since bodily appearances could be photographed and measured at the same time, people, usually posing naked before this focused scientific gaze, were holding different measuring devices like rulers, or were photographed in front of metric grids. This method was understood to create a possibility for comparing all people and all ‘races’ in the world, and place them in a hierarchical evolutionary system according to physical appearances. The anthropometric method was an expression of power, and part of an evolutionary ideology that made it possible to legitimise colonisation with the ‘heroic’ intention to develop these ‘savage’ people to the level of the ‘civilised’, supposedly superior white man (*sic*).

The first photographs taken in Ethiopia were by a British Protestant missionary, of German-Jewish origin, Henry Stern, arriving in 1859. Others followed suite during the 1880’s. As Richard Pankhurst (1992) points out, photographic representations have played an important role in Ethiopian politics and power struggles during the twentieth century. One of Pankhurst’s examples is how Jonathan Dimpleby’s film *The Hidden Famine* interrupted by shots of Emperor Haile Selassie feeding meat to his dogs as people were dying of hunger, contributed to his fall from power (Pankhurst 1992: 240). Richard Pankhurst and Denis Gérard likewise notes that Ethiopian rulers made “use of foreign visiting photographers to take the pictures *they* desired” (Pankhurst et al. 1999: 119, *my italics*), thus utilising precisely the retoric persuasiveness of photographs, in their quest for power.

An example of positioning: This young woman came to my house in the village and asked to be photographed. I forgot to ask her name. Even if her expression is somewhat similar in the two pictures there are a few things that make her look stronger in the photograph to the right. Aside from her removal of the shawl used for carrying things on her back, the slightly lower position of the photographer making her break through the line of the horizon in the background, helps to empower her.

However, I think it is important to remember that even if a person can display a considerable amount of agency in the photographic situation, a point also forwarded by Pink (1999) above, it is the photographer's physical point of view that will force the viewer to apply a certain position in relation to what is photographed. Øivind Storm Bjerke (2003) underlines this point when he states that "the perspective we choose for the occasion will have a decisive influence on the interpretation. The components we extract and invest with significance may well, from a different angle, seem unimportant and insignificant" (Storm Bjerke 2003: 17). The photographer's positioning must therefore be understood as decisive in relation to the ascribed valuation put on the 'Other'. This discursive potential of photographic representations is at play when a stereotype image of a given people is constituted. The worldwide visual transmission of suffering, basically from the famine in Ethiopia in 1984-85, seems to have created an implication that the Ethiopian people have been starving ever since. My point is not concerned with concealing the fact that Ethiopia is still one of the poorest countries in the world, and that there certainly have been both famines and wars in Ethiopia since then. I want to point to the lasting impact of only *one* possible representation of a given people, in this case titled 'the starving Ethiopian people'. Photographic images including both films and stills, played a decisive role in this process, creating a specific image of a particular circumstance; and implicitly a discourse that works towards disempowering an entire population. Consequently, even though I have chosen not to reproduce this particular image here, it will most likely influence how my own photographs from Ethiopia are perceived.

Liisa H. Mallki (1995) states that photographs of refugees, and in my opinion also photographs of people struck by famine, are stereotypes created to match *our* preconceived images of what a refugee or starving person essentially is. And she adds an interesting point: "Having looked at photographs of refugees over several years, one becomes aware of the perennial resonance of the woman with her child; she is composed as an almost madonnalike figure" (Mallki 1995: 11). Terence Wright (2000) develops Mallki's argument by claiming that western media representations of forced migration and human suffering like famine, conform to historical archetypes based in Christian iconography; stereotypes as 'Fall of Man', 'Flight to Egypt', 'Exodus' and 'Madonna and Child'. Wright shows that these archetypes also influence textual representations, and quotes Michael Buerk in his film shown on BBC Television News of the Ethiopian famine in 1984: "Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night (...) it lights up a *biblical* famine, now in the twentieth century. This place, say workers here, is the closest thing to hell on Earth" (Buerk in Wright 2000: 9, *my italics*). These representations, as Wright further states, "frequently objectifies them, dismissing their historical, cultural and political circumstances" (Wright 2000: 24).

Interestingly, a discussion about representations of the famine in 1984-85 surfaced in Ethiopia in the autumn of 2001, when an American Hollywood film company, Golden Gate Inc., wanted to make a major feature film about the tragedy. *Beyond Borders* was going to include



several hundred Ethiopians, including film professionals, in what many Ethiopians, including the Ethiopian government, felt would once again put Ethiopia in a 'negative light'. However, in 'Letter from the Editor' in the Addis Ababa based newspaper *Addis Tribune* 14th December 2001, another view is stated: "In a country that wishes to keep the memory of a million people in the back pages of a history book, the film could have provided a good means of remembering them, the famine and how it happened, (...)." The case of representing the Ethiopian famine illustrates again how visual representations, be they film or stills, can lend themselves to support a particular, in this case political view. However, these images also play a role in fund-raising. When I finalised my fieldwork and left Ethiopia in the end of November 2002 another catastrophic famine was developing. The number of affected people, basically in the northeast and eastern parts of Ethiopia, including eastern Tigray, was estimated to be between 12 and 14 million. The Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told BBC radio on 11th November 2002¹ that he feared that the world might be lulled into thinking that this present drought was manageable precisely because of the lack of photographic images on TV of human skeletons.

Photography as a discursive social practice

When photographing in Tigray, I have chosen to let people set the premises for their self-representation, how they are posed and with whom. I have suggested the location, and decided the lighting and the cropping, and not least important, as already noted above; my point of view. Even if I have tried my best to understand how people would like to be represented, I do not claim to have had no influence on the photographic situation, and hence my attempts are a far cry from the following highly questionable, but nevertheless rather sweet remark in Malinowski's *Diary*, 24th December 1917: "I saw them through their eyes (it's fine to have this ability), but I forgot to look at them with my own" (Malinowski 1967: 163). However, what I do propose as a fruitful analytic perspective is to interpret photography, not in terms of authenticity or 'truthfulness', but based in the interpretation of photographs as a discourse, and consequently, as a discursive social practice

Portrait-photography as a discipline is filled with convention. Some of these, like the strict half or full-figure poses having their roots in Victorian Europe, are, I will claim, close to universal. Photography as a visual practice was born in the western world and vested with western visual conventions rooted in art, but also in cultural and social practices. In *Photographies and Modernities in Africa*, Heike Behrend and Jean-Francois Werner state:

"[w]hile, on one hand, photography was integrated into already existing visual traditions, on the other, it also shaped and transformed African practices and discourses, especially those in relation to memory and the construction of personhood" (Behrend et al. 2001: 241).

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

Left page: At Alemseged's marriage, the bridegroom's sister Weizero (right) poses with relatives, from the left Burchuqo, and two times Yenalem. They all burst into laughter before they manage to contain themselves.

Right page: The bridegroom's best man Mengistu (with the plastic mug used for millet beer) and other family members and friends, from the left Berhe, Destaalem, Menigstu, Muruts' and Yirga. Berhe is triumphantly holding a saw; I guess in the absence of a *kalashen*. March 2002.



As a modern technique of reproduction, photography as a discursive social practice is also involved in establishing various visions of modernity (Behrend et al. 2001), and people's self-presentations would often be classified accordingly. The frontal whole-figure pose, applying a serious gaze looking straight into the camera and resembling the portraits taken everywhere before speedier films gave room for a more relaxed pose and snapshots, is classified as that of *wedi* or *gwal hagereseb*, meaning 'boy or girl from the country-side', carrying negative connotations by those who feel they are more modern. A more modern pose however, would be those used by actors; most known actors being those from Indian films that are frequently shown on video in the market town. These actors' poses are reproduced on posters that can be bought locally, and are decorating *bunabéts* and people's homes together with pictures of Mariyam, Jesus and the Saints belonging to the Orthodox Christian belief (see appendix 1). Boys and young men might throw off their shirts to pose as Rambos together with their friends or on their own. There are those showing off in ready-made clothes or with more modern props as a radio to signify acquired status and acceptance into the modern sphere, as well as applying traditional artefacts to reassure an Ethiopian cultural identity. Abeba had shown me photographs from her life in the Middle-East, relating her to a material reality differing from that of Tigray. The photographs also showed her together with other Ethiopian women wearing their white embroidered dresses conducting the coffee ceremony; reinforcing their Ethiopianness in Diaspora. Men would often choose to pose with guns, and thus represent a masculinity that favours strength and force, but also strong male bonds. When Orthodox Books or Crosses are the attributes it signifies power in a spiritual sense. As a matter of fact, not any of the female ex-fighters I encountered asked to be photographed with a *kalashen*. Women would more often communicate gender-identity and status through their use of clothes and gold; enhancing their beauty. Hence the use of material markers works to reinforce a particular identity. As for women, if sensuality is at play, it would be more inviting than demanding. That female sexuality also here seems to be situated within the Whore-Madonna dichotomy is visible through the display of posters of the Virgin Mary together with sensual poses of female Indian actors. In my experience people are implicitly familiar with the discursive potential of the photographic medium to constitute as well as reinforce self-identity. This is shown by their comments when I handed over their photographs; if they did not like the picture I was blamed for the failure to represent them properly, and suggests likewise that photographs, not automatically, are perceived as true.

One example of the significance photography has gained, in relation to identity and memory, as suggested above, is indicated in the fact that the Eritrean-Ethiopian war created a boom in the photographic business in places close to the front, military camps or other centres like Shire / Endaselassie where the soldiers went on leave. Photographed in military or civil attire, they display self-esteem and status gained. These photographs also show new friendships and love relations made possible by the war; relations that might end abruptly by the lethal effects of the war itself, or end the day the war is over and the soldiers return home. Sent to friends

and family back home, photographs likewise serve as a reconfirmation of existing relationships. Collecting these photographs and displaying them in golden frames might be interpreted as literally patching up a shattered life as well as reconfirming ones positioning within social relationships.

I also noticed how photographs I had given to one particular person, showed up at somebody else's house; suggesting that photographs were exchanged among acquaintances to reassure relations. Likewise, if I sent the photographs with somebody else to hand them over, fewer copies might reach the person than the ones I had sent; sometimes they 'disappeared' altogether. There was also a question of money: two young sisters between six and eight years of age who, on remembering that I took several pictures of them, but only provided them with one developed in the nearest town asked, "did you sell the other ones?" That my photographic work is not producing a huge surplus of money has been difficult to communicate, because why am I doing it then? (That is, by the way, a question also asked by my parents in Norway). My stand during fieldwork has been that all photographs have been given back for free; similar small size prints are usually sold for 5 birr² at local photographers' shops. Further, taking into account that my procedure could disturb the businesses of local photographers, I have been rather selective with my subjects, not photographing everybody that happened to ask, but preferring those cases where I felt it could bring about an opening up of new doors or reassure existing relations, thereby weaving my own network of social relations. As Alula Pankhurst says about his fieldwork experience in an Ethiopian resettlement village: "settlers were very keen to have their pictures taken, and once I had given a few people prints the demand became so persistent that I stopped taking pictures altogether" (Pankhurst 1989: 20). In my case, I experienced photographing in Tigray as a situation of shared joy, enabling me to give them something they desired in return for their generosity. Returning photographs to people along the way, has secured a minimum of reciprocity that I consider an essential means, not to be allowed into a Tigrayan community or home in the first place, but to be welcomed to stay on.

Emic understanding of photographic representations

The most common local criticism on my photographic representations has been concerned with the fact that I often chose to crop people halfway, not including their feet. I see this criticism on proper representation according to local convention, as different from my own approach towards a person's photographic representation. This might be due to western focus on rationality and mind; seeing the face as a potential carrier of selfhood, and thus as a metonym for the whole person. In the Tigrayan context however, the representation was not seen as complete if it did not show the whole body; as though being a whole person takes a whole body also in its represented version.

² 1US\$ = approx. 8,5 Ethiopian birr



Alemseged (25) posing with his young bride Mebraht (15).

One day a woman looked me up to complain that the picture of her father was *tebalashiwa*, 'damaged'. *H'ariru*, she said, which means 'burnt', a word also used when burning the stew in the casserole. What she was referring to was that half of her father's face in the picture was black; left in a shadow because of the light-source. Much of the feedback on my photographs has been concerned with this fact; if the represented colour of their skin is as fair, *q'eyh'e*, literally meaning 'red', as they think it should be. Being called *ts'elim*, 'black', is perceived as a negative characteristic. When a peasant I knew was referred to as 'black', he felt offended. Dark skin is said to be that of *baria*, a slave³. For the same reason, one dark skinned woman in a rural village told me she did not want to be photographed if I was not able to change her skin colour to a beautiful 'red'. The ambiguity that was possible to apply to her statement, as whether it concerned her actual skin or the photographic image, gave way to my answer which was later referred to in a *bunabét* in the market town, and occasioned much hilarity. Feeling increasingly irritated by this repeated reference to skin colour, and the clear preference for the fair skin, I said to the woman: "I'm not God". But of course a photographer can manipulate skin colour in photographs. On the old black and white photographs people show me, as well as the black and white photographs used for Tigrayans ID-cards, their faces are printed white.

During the post-modern era C. S. Peirce's semiotic theory was seen as a useful framework to theorise photographic representations. Peirce suggests three types of signs; *icon* based on resemblance; *index* based on causality, suggesting that the image would receive meaning from elements that could be understood as excluded; and lastly *symbol* based on convention (Heradstveit et al. 1996: 31). All these three types of signs are relevant for analysing photographs. The photographic representations in the above-mentioned examples however, are understood in terms of an icon, implicating likeness between a person and her representation. This perspective further implicates that it is possible to think that a photograph of 'Hanna' is not just a representation of her at a given time in space, but is making us think that the photograph shows how 'Hanna' essentially *is*. This interpretation is based on convention more than 'truth', but it also shows how photographs can be used to reinforce *one*, among many possible understandings of a person or phenomenon. Further, an indexical understanding of the photographic sign indicates how more meaning could be generated from the photograph than is actually shown in the image itself. However, the strong relationship between person(s) and photograph(s) as based in an understanding of the photograph as an icon, is also shown in what reactions are generated by someone doing something to your picture, tearing it apart or burning it.

On one occasion before a trip to the rural areas I discarded some underexposed photographs in the baking stove for *injerra*, the *megogo*, knowing that it would be fired up the next morning. When the maid found the pieces and showed them to the people concerned, it

³ The slave trade was still going on internally in Ethiopia during the first half of the twentieth century (Hammond 1999: 247).



was taken as a token of hostility and inflicted a blow to our relationship. When I returned after a week, I found a fragment of a picture of myself ripped to pieces and stuck under my door. Initially I thought little of it. Then others started to tell me that some of the family members were furious. Eventually a friend of the family asked me why I had intended to burn the photographs. I told him that they were too dark, and that other better versions of similar pictures were already given to the family. This seemed to settle the matter. However, this incident and the strong emotion it created was among the first indications of the prevailing mistrust inherent in social relations, and hence the perceived vulnerability of the individual within these relationships.

However, since people related to me as a photographer, I was often invited to participate in social gatherings. At one such occasion I had photographed a young wedded couple on the day when the bride was taken to her groom's home. While I was photographing the room was full of people wanting to participate in the event, and to have their pictures taken. I had to make people sit down to allow the outside light to enter the room through the door, as the *h'edmo*, the traditional stone house with timber, stone and clay roof had no windows. It seemed everyone had a comment or instruction about how the couple should pose, but it basically resembled the historical pictures of the Ethiopian kings and queens, or nobles with serious faces; the only difference being the surroundings and small chickens tumbling around their feet. When I later returned to hand over the pictures the people present started picking out the pictures of themselves; the groom's best friend, *medeb arki*, literally meaning 'his bed-mate'⁴, immediately put all the pictures where he was present in his pocket. Rather provoked by his act I called him, "*leba*, thief", and pointed out that the pictures were meant for the bride and groom as a remembrance, and if others wanted any of the pictures they had to ask their permission. The best man reluctantly handed back the photographs, but as I have observed on other occasions, a picture of oneself with or without other people, is considered one's own.

I have conformed to people's wish for a nice fair skin colour by always using flash, but I have not always included their feet. According to Karl G. Heider (1976), 'whole bodies' is an important norm for visual ethnographic representations, to be able to capture contextualised action. I acknowledge his point, but the question is if it will ever be possible to include *enough* context to represent a situation 'truthfully'. Further, the situation will more often than not be represented from only one viewpoint, maybe two if more cameras are available. In my opinion it is not only a question of context, but as mentioned above; the positioning of the photographer in relation to the photographed is likewise decisive. A photographic representation, as I have argued, is always a fragment out of context, and dependent on what the photographer chooses as significant and wants to communicate to her audience. According to Marilyn Starthern, textual ethnographies have likewise "always been composed of cut-outs, bits extracted from context, brought together in analysis and narrative" (Strathern 1994: 213). Further, Heider's

⁴ Male friends are often sleeping together, but there is a strong taboo on homosexuality.

I was amazed by the steady attention the best man Mengistu gives the photographer during the whole event. As a best man, he was entitled to take the bride back to her family for her dowry, *gezmi*. She brings five cows and 350 birr into the marriage, which is considered a good dowry. The groom gets two cows from his mother, who has been divorced for many years.

argument is concerned primarily with what people *do*, not with peoples' self-identity. I must admit though, that when I tried to include people's feet I realised that most men in the rural villages wore shoes, the car-tyre type or *kongo*, the cast plastic ones, while many of the women did not wear shoes at all.

Anyway, I have chosen the cropping according to how we conventionally perceive represented selfhood in a western context, allowing fragmentation of the body. My choice was based on what I thought necessary to represent their presence, enabling empathy and resonance from one self to another, even if they felt they were represented less 'whole'. At the same time I have put together series of photographs from different situations to make up for lack of context in a single photograph. Photographing whole bodies would require the photographs being taken from a longer distance, increasing the possibility of making the viewer a *voyeur*, and the photographed an 'Other'.

Interpreting photographs in a social anthropological context

Joanna C. Scherer (1992) says about interpreting photographs: "When we see words we use our knowledge of grammar to interpret and understand them. When we see photographs there are no comparable rules to help us 'read' them." She pinpoints the contradiction implicit in "the fact that 'vision' is used as a metaphor for 'understanding' (...), [but that] a legitimatisation of visuals has not been transferred to social-science scholarship" (Scherer 1992: 33). The Positivist belief that photographs could document the world truthfully has developed into a general distrustfulness, close to disqualification within the social sciences, and Scherer notes that "the visual in Western culture is more often associated with intuition, art and implicit knowledge, while the verbal is associated with reason, fact and objective information" (Scherer 1992: 32).

Although interpreting photographic images indeed is problematic there is an insistence on, according to Gillian Rose, that "images themselves do something (...) [and] that visual images can be powerful and seductive in their own right" (Rose 2001: 2). Rose emphasises that images relate to both what we do see and what we do not see, and that it is not only a question of how a picture looks, but how it is looked at in relation to ourselves. Likewise, images relate to a wider cultural context, implicating specific social premises where the effect of already existing visual images might be embedded, as I have claimed is the case of the stereotype images of the Ethiopian people. And finally, that the impact of visual images can indeed be resisted by their audience, which would mean that an audience could be, as Jenny Hammond claims, "reluctant to accept perceptions of Ethiopian people, which contradicted the images of famine they had been fed by the media" (Hammond 1999: 197).

But, as Elisabeth Edwards asks, what then makes a photograph anthropological? Her own answer is: "At its simplest an anthropological photograph is any photograph from which an anthropologist could gain useful, meaningful visual information" (Edwards 1992: 13). This



When the bride has left with the best man, I am hijacked by Alemseged's neighbour and friend Mogus to photograph his family in their home. Mogus' father Gerlasse (in the middle), is flanked by Berhe (who followed me to be photographed again) and Hagus.

leads me to the question of how to interpret the photographs in this thesis? Primarily I see photographs as correctives to images we automatically create in our imagination, of people and places, when we read text. Secondly, photographs represent an empirical reality differently than text, and implicitly contextualises the text visually. Thirdly it is possible to extract useful anthropological information by using all the different analytical perspectives proposed by Rose (2001) above. Semiology and discourse analysis I have already elaborated on; below I will take a swift look at the use of content and compositional analysis, and how these analytic perspectives feed into the discursive aspect of photographs.

An analysis of content would imply making an ethnographic inventory to register whatever can be identified in the photograph, concerning persons and material culture such as dresses and hairstyles, as well as objects, buildings and places. Content analysis has its semiotic base in the photograph as an icon, and relates to what is actually present in the picture. Thus this analytic perspective on its own does not take into consideration an indexical reading of the photographic image, and hence do not address the aspect of exclusion so central to photographic representation. However, what is actually included in the image might indeed reinforce a particular interpretation, and thus implicitly one particular discursive aspect of a phenomenon. Likewise, compositional analysis could be useful for identifying elements chosen as significant by how these are spatially positioned in the picture. This analytic perspective is also important to be able to analyse the photographer's point of view, and implicitly how the different elements have been given value by the photographer.

That I have chosen to work within the framework of a traditional portrait tradition, used in ethnography to document everything from 'race' and 'types' to ethnicity, could of course arouse negative connotations. In old ethnographic photographs people might even have number tags attached to them while posing (Edwards 1992) to ease categorisation in ethnographic archives. Even though I do acknowledge the impact of already existing images on 'new' imagery, my aim has nevertheless been to fill this particular framework with representations of living people, not only ethnographic data. However, even if my objective has been to pay attention to people's staged self-presentations and their integrity as individuals, I cannot prevent my audience from emphasising other messages than those I have been concerned with. An Ethiopian PhD candidate to whom I showed a collection of my photographs said that these are all typical Tigrayans, himself belonging to another ethnic group in Ethiopia. I am not saying that being *Tigraway*, Tigrayan, is not an important part of people's identity, rather that ethnicity was not mobilised as a relevant strategy in daily life situations within the ethnically homogeneous⁵ Tigray region during the course of my fieldwork. However, photographs produced both within the field of social anthropology and outside, have in my opinion, contributed to the trend of

⁵ According to *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia*, 94,8 % of the population in Tigray is Tigraway, Tigrinya-speaking Tigrayans.

From the left, Gerlasse surrounded by two of his youngest daughters, Lemlem and Nitchi both engaged to be married (shown by their *maeteb*, the black necklace), and his son Mogus with his young wife Tebelets looking down on their child Kubrum. To the far right is Mogus' brother Ataley.



creating what John G. Galaty suggests as an 'iconography of specific geographical and ethnic visual representations' where "visual elements – stance, style, hue, form, apparel, adornment, setting – (...) makes subjects into emblems of different cultures and places" (Galaty 2002: 348). My point is that I prefer to interpret these above mentioned features as concerned with self-identity and impression management, and as such as more than culturally approved aesthetics; allowing space for subjectivity. Anthony Giddens' (1991) focus on *appearance* and *demeanour*, *sensuality* and *regimes*⁶ makes body-practice an "essential part of the sustaining of a coherent sense of self-identity" (Giddens 1991: 99). His shift of focus from self-identity as constituted by the biographic narrative which I have elaborated on in chapter 2, to body-practice, in my opinion helps to explain how people can have a coherent experience of self-identity even if the biographic narrative is in flux. That many of the ex-fighter women from the Tigrayan revolution are subduing their fighter identity, and are complying with the common dress code as well as sanctioned behaviour for women, a point I will discuss in chapter 4, is in my opinion not just resignation, but precisely a strategy to be able to negotiate a position in the local community. Hence, the focus of analysis is shifted from heaping together all that seems visually similar, as has been a common method of interpreting visual cultural markers in ethnography in general, and in ethnographic photographs in particular, to understand how material culture are not only complied with, but subjectively manipulated, as well as totally or only partly abandoned.

I have suggested above that two main conventional strategies for photographic self-representation in the Tigrayan context; the serious frontal pose that is usually interpreted as old-fashioned, but respectable, and the more actor-like seductive poses, perceived as more fashionably modern, but flirting with the norms of respectability. What these two strategies might have in common, if anything, is the common containment of emotion. One woman voicing her displeasure with her ten year old daughter's, in my opinion, beautiful smile in her photograph, said "*sinni*, teeth"; meaning by showing her teeth she was showing off too much. It is considered better to keep your mouth shut in a double sense. *Gurenya* is a word often used about people who are considered too self-conscious and proud, the word bearing clear negative connotations. The cultural value is on 'keeping quiet', and thus containment of whatever emotion might shatter your self as well as your respectability, and equally important, would make you vulnerable as an individual in a relational context.

⁶ Giddens explains the use of these concepts as follows: "Bodily *appearance* concerns all those features of the surface of the body, including modes of dress and adornment, which are visible to the individual and to other agents, and which are ordinarily used to interpret actions. *Demeanour* determines how appearance is used by individuals within generic settings of day-to-day activities: it is how the body is mobilised in relation to constitutive conventions of daily life. The *sensuality* of the body refers to the dispositional handling of pleasure and pain. Finally we have the *regimes* to which bodies are subject" (Giddens 1991: 99). This latter aspect I will return to in chapter 5.

Till now I have used self-presentation and self-representation as my point of departure for understanding how individuals negotiate their position in social interaction. In the following chapter I will focus my discussion on how gender is involved in this positioning, and likewise how normative gender identity instructs individual agency. I will define gendered practices which reassure sanctioned gender identity, and thus implicitly constitute the cultural limits to women's (and men's) agency. My own self-presentation and performance as an ambiguous sexual being made me realise that a female body in itself is not enough to fulfil the culturally sanctioned category 'woman'. Likewise women's life-stories show that compliance with social convention is far from absolute, and that compliance could also be understood as a strategy. In the following chapter I will explore how women are able to negotiate space for agency beyond the norm within the confines of a sanctioned gender identity.

Chapter 4

GENDER-PRACTICE; GENDERED IDENTITY

My curiosity about women's agency was initially aroused by the apparent fact that a significant number of Tigrayan women participated as fighters in the revolutionary struggle against the military regime *Derg* in Ethiopia (1975-1991).¹ Their participation was a pronounced break with traditional gender norms. Women had joined the liberation army in order to liberate the Tigrayan people, and equally important, due to the revolutionary promise of gender equality. Nevertheless, even though the Tigrayan revolution represented a possibility to escape traditional gender roles, the fighter women seemed to comply with cultural norms and under-communicate their participation as soon as they were demobilised. Women's initial participation had been a strong expression of agency *beyond* an ideal gender norm that has emphasised female passivity and submissiveness. Thus my question is; was women's agency quenched as a result of the re-establishment of the traditional sexual division of labour, which seemed to occur on the return to normality after the TPLF based coalition EPRDF had overthrown the *Derg*? I will therefore explore whether the fighter women's retreat represents mere resignation in the face of traditionalism, or if there are other strategic considerations in play. In order to define women's strategies, I will begin by defining practices which reinforce normative gender identity for women in the Tigrayan context; conducting the coffee ceremony and fulfilling motherhood.

Women's culture

I have often been asked how I like 'Ethiopian culture'. 'Culture', as an *emic* concept, most often means traditions connected to food and drink, *sewa*, the local millet beer, *injerra*, the sour-tasting pancake and the coffee ceremony; likewise social celebrations such as marriage, baptism and other public holidays or church holidays. It could also mean appearance such as dress and hairstyle, and not least, oral traditions, music and dance. People seem to be proud of these aspects of their own 'culture'² and these aspects in my experience, are those most eagerly and

¹ Tigrayan women's participation in TPLF-Tigray People's Liberation Front, and the struggle against the military regime in Ethiopia coincides with their Eritrean sisters' fight for a liberated Eritrea (1961-1991). The armies of both TPLF and EPLF-Eritrean People's Liberation Front, comprised at some point of as much as 30 % women (Hammond 1999, Young 1997, Hale 2001).

² These are also the aspects of 'Ethiopian culture' the official Ethiopia is promoting as a possible tourist attraction in addition to their ancient history with its historical sites scattered around the country. The emphasis on the development of a 'Tigrayan culture' during the revolution was precisely a means to mobilise the peasants (Young 1997). Likewise Tronvoll states that "TPLF's use of Tigrean [Tigrayan] 'culture' and history to legitimise their political aspirations gave them grassroots support which helped them in the fight against the Derg and other competing political movements in Tigray in 1970s and 1980s" (Tronvoll 2003: 146).



Mizan is married and has four sons between one and twelve years of age; here photographed on the bed in their home wearing her gold; usually done only for celebrations. In the market town and other towns, housewives who do not work in the fields like the women in the villages do, or are not employed, are talked about as *kof ila geza*, as 'sitting at home'.

explicitly shared with foreigners. Highland Ethiopians are proud of what they would call the 'traditional Ethiopian hospitality', where the coffee ceremony has a central role. The coffee ceremony is often presented as the essence of 'Ethiopian culture', although such a generalisation does not cover the diversity of cultures in Ethiopia. However, the coffee ceremony is offered to friends and guests alike; it serves as a symbol of emphasis on sociability, and offers a passage into their communion. On visiting a woman's home in a rural village, to give her photographs I had taken of her and her family during the rainy season, I refused food and coffee, since I had just eaten at her neighbour's house. She asked, "but what can we do together then?" She seemed to think that if I refused coffee there was nothing we could share, and having seen through the photographs she left the room to do some other work.

The whole ceremony might last between one and one and half hours. The floor should be decorated with fresh grass and incense burnt. The coffee beans are roasted on the coal stove. When cooled for a while the beans are crushed in a mortar to a fine powder. The coffee is boiled in a *jebena*, a special ceramic coffee pot, and three brews are made from the same portion of powdered beans. The coffee should be *h'afiss*, bitter, and is served with a lot of sugar in small cups, *fenjal*. Making coffee might take place up to three times a day, again when a guest arrives, and consumes a lot of women's time. If you accept to participate you are expected to stay for the time it takes to complete the ceremony, through the three brews that are called *awel*, *kalay* and *bereka*.

It is the woman who conducts the coffee ceremony. She is in charge. Men who know how to do it and take the chance of serving other people are questioned about their gender identity. "Are you a man or a woman?" Men are therefore reluctant to make coffee if other women are present. Women might say that the coffee was not good; implicitly claiming that, because of their sex, men are not able to conduct the ceremony properly. Even though the coffee ceremony could be interpreted as a metonym for 'Ethiopian culture', conducting the coffee ceremony could also be understood to reinforce a culturally sanctioned womanhood. When I ask Rahwa³ (18), a student who is one of just a few women who plough, a male activity, what she would say if her future husband conducted the coffee ceremony, she answers: "he cannot do it. Men cannot do it". Referring to the general attitude, she says: "The women would say, 'bahlitina, it is our culture. The men have not learned to do it. How can you make coffee?' They would tell him, 'kla! move! I will do it myself'. The same would happen if a man wants to make *injerra*, the sour-tasting pancake that is their staple food. When I learned to plough," Rahwa continues, "many of the men encouraged me, as did some of the women; but most likely the women would insult me." Thus her example also suggests the importance for precisely women to keep up the gender norm.

³ Recorded interview, 9th October 2002. Her name is altered.

Azeb runs a *bunabét*, bar and hotel. I had watched how she had been putting henna on her feet three days on a row. Earlier on she had given her body a round with *sasola*, a root that is said to have stimulating properties for skin, muscles and the blood-circulation. It gives a red colour like henna. When I asked her why, she told me that there is no other work. When I ask about the bullet holes still visible in her bar, I am told they are from the time of the *Derg*. September 2002



During the revolution, the *Weyane* [TPLF] encouraged women to plough. Saba⁴ (45), a cadre, told me about one occasion in a rural village when the *Weyane* wanted to prove for the people that women could plough. To conduct the test the farmers had given a woman the most difficult oxen. “She ploughed, they saw it themselves, oh revolution!” Saba says with a laugh. The TPLF later withdrew their stand on this potent symbolical gender-issue; the reason given was that it would only add to women’s already heavy workload (Hammond 1999). In *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, John Young (1997) questions this official reasoning, and suggests instead that TPLF feared that by encouraging women to plough they would cause offence, by challenging core religious and social beliefs about women in rural Tigrayan society. Even though women have been secured equal rights in the Ethiopian Constitution of 1994⁵, the revolution nevertheless failed to challenge core structures in the relationship between men and women. Still, as a woman you are not supposed to do men’s work, or vice versa. In such cases people would question your gender identity. “Maybe if the woman is ill the man is allowed to do the coffee ceremony; if there are no other women present,” Rahwa says and continues: “if my [future] husband made me coffee and people got to know about it, it would generate a lot of insult; that I dislike. If nobody got to know about it however, I would like it a lot. We could be equal,” she says. However, the TPLF was not consistent with its claim for equality between men and women, if it meant challenging the peasants’ support of the revolution itself; and the traditional sexual division of labour prevails.

Girls will start at an age of between six and eight years old to help their mothers in the process. By the time they are ten some are allowed to conduct the ceremony themselves. Young girls often act out the ceremony with their playmates in the backyard. The one in charge would be draped in a piece of cloth, meant to resemble the traditional white *nets’ela* that most women choose to use, and commands her friends to play their roles correctly.

⁴ Recorded interview, 15th October 2002. Her name is altered.

⁵ The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 8th December 1994. Article 35: Rights of Women. (1) Women shall, in the enjoyment of rights and protections provided by this Constitution, have equal rights with men. (2) Women have equal rights with men in marriage as proscribed by this Constitution. (3) The historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia taken into account, women, in order to remedy this legacy, are entitled to affirmative measures. The purpose of such measures shall provide special attention to women so as to enable them to compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, social and economic life as well as in public and private institutions. (4) The State shall enforce the right of women to eliminate the influences of harmful customs. Laws, customs and practices that oppress or cause bodily and mental harm to women are prohibited. (...) (7) Women have the right to acquire, administer, control, use and transfer property. In particular, they have equal rights with men with respect to use, transfer, administration and control of land. They shall also enjoy equal treatment in the inheritance of property (Fasil Nahum 1997: 226-7).

Motherhood and strategic positioning

Although I did consume an infinite amount of coffee during my fieldwork, I never learnt to conduct the coffee ceremony myself since my Tigrayan husband does it without objection. I usually did not wear a *nets'ela* either, even if my age required that I did; the only occasion being attending church. It was noticed and talked about that I had worn it the right way at Lemlem's⁶ funeral with the coloured lining up. I also know it was discussed that I wore trousers most of the time, resembling a *tegadalit*, a fighter woman. Likewise, that I did not spend my expected wealth to buy expensive dresses and gold⁷, which, more than agency as such, would signify a Tigrayan woman's successfulness. Both this and the fact that I have not given birth, and am reluctant to do so, made people question my gender by directly asking me: "Are you a man or a woman?" One woman put her hand under my shirt to establish if I had breasts and thus a female body. Another middle-aged woman in a rural village said, after having stated that I looked like a man: "But God gave you just a little one", while showing with the tip of her finger what would resemble the clitoris. Likewise, an old female traditional healer always asked me if it was true that I have not given birth. I would confirm this. Then she would tell me repeatedly, "please, just one child". She would point to her stomach, and make a motion with her face and body, showing me that I am on my way to become a dried-out prune if I do not give birth soon. She asks "don't you have a heart?" A man in his thirties told me: "You could have borne a child by now. People would say that it is Thera's daughter or Thera's son. If you do not give birth; where will you be? When you die, you will be remembered through your children. Who will remember you?" When I tell him my age, he makes a whistling sound and says, "*kedki*. It is too late."

Tigrayan women are achieving social worth from giving birth.⁸ Motherhood, in the region I studied, could be understood as a requirement to becoming a 'real' woman. An educated woman with her own earnings might decide to have fewer children, but my impression is that she would never really consider *not* having children. The exception is if the woman decides to become an Orthodox nun, and hence has to suppress her femaleness to advance spiritually (Wright 2001). In Europe however, according to the heritage of Simone de Beauvoir's ([1949] 1988) thinking and western feminism, the tendency has been to see children as an obstacle to women's freedom, or at least a question: 'what do we do about being mothers?'

An old peasant, himself a father of ten children, told my Tigrayan husband and me: "Love without children is worthless". According to him, a woman not wanting children like myself, cannot be trusted, or it would mean she does not trust her partner. When I ask the

⁶ Her name is altered. Lemlem's death will be discussed in chapter 6.

⁷ Gold is seen as an investment which women would exchange in times of hardship.

⁸ According to *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia* the fertility rate in Tigray is 6,95 against an average of 6,74 for Ethiopia in general.



Telaynesh (35), mother of four children. Here at the *geleb*, cleansing, seven days after she has given birth to her fourth child, a girl. Female family members, neighbours and friends, arrive early in the morning at her house to wash her blanket, the bed sheets, her dresses and the pieces of cloth used for her baby, in a nearby river. The laundry is all packed in a bundle for one woman to carry; the others follow behind singing and ululating. Tied to the top of the bundle is a big knife for protection against evil. Women are said to be especially vulnerable to spirit attacks and illness the first twelve days after having given birth. Traditionally a woman would stay home and rest until the baptism, forty days if it is a boy, eighty days if it is a girl. Telaynesh assured me she felt free to go out after twelve days, but since she still felt weak and had severe headaches, she chose to use the next eighty days to recover. April 2002.

ex-fighter woman Lula⁹ if love between man and woman is not possible without a child, she answers: "In this place they want children fast. Children reinforce love." When a friend came to visit me from Norway she was immediately asked by the women if she had children. When they found out she had, one woman said: "she is clever, you are foolish". My voiced reluctance towards becoming a mother turned out to become a major concern for both men and women who tried their best to make me change my mind. This choice of positioning, not always complying with culturally sanctioned gender norms, exploited the fact that I was never able to acquire 'Sameness' anyway, due to the 'Otherness' inherent in my skin colour. However, by crossing the gender-line, I was explicitly told where the boundary is situated.

Conducting the coffee ceremony is imperatively a women's domain of sexed practice, engendering gender, and few men dare challenge this delineation because of the questioning and insulting it generates about their own gender. Following Pierre Bourdieu (1977), the 'sexual division of labour' as well as 'division of sexual labour' must be understood to embody normative practices for both men and women. But equally important, by consorting to sanctioned gendered practices, a normative gender identity is produced and reproduced, and hence deviant practices threaten this identity. However, to be able to move beyond the structural coercion implicit in Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, Henrietta Moore (1988) suggests that subjective strategies are involved in the reproduction of these norms:

"gender[ed] relations receive symbolic emphasis because they are the social arena in which individuals are enabled to make political claims and initiate personal strategies. It is through the competing claims that women and men make on one another, in the context of particular sets of social and economic relations, that the cultural conceptions of gender are constructed" (Moore 1988: 37).

These gendered positions can be interpreted as an 'investment', Moore (1994) further states with a reference to Wendy Holliday, and directed at "the very real, material social and economic benefits which are the reward" (Moore 1994: 65). This explains why keeping up certain gendered practices are important for both men and women, and that these gendered expert positions are used to negotiate personal interests. Complying with the gender norm, as the fighter women in my example below do, might be a way of actually securing a possibility for negotiations and hence access to scarce resources. The fact that women seem to be the fiercest defenders of the gender norm, as Rahwa above experienced, likewise suggests that for women, alternative options for negotiations might be extremely limited, or even absent.

⁹ Recorded interview 7th November, 2002. Her name is altered.



Space for agency; Rahwa's choice

That agency beyond normative gender practices challenges culturally sanctioned gender identity is a point also forwarded by Bilen Gisaw:

"[f]orthrightness in women is viewed as unfeminine. The idea of women's submissiveness is so embedded in the [Ethiopian] society that energy and creativity have become synonymous with masculinity, all in spite of the great contributions made by women" (Bilen 2002: 36).

Likewise, although male discourse on female sexuality in Tigray is concerned with women's appetite for sex, women's passivity and submissiveness seem to be the cultural norm. By not complying with normative gender practices women would risk either their gender identity, by being classified as men, or being stigmatised as *shermut'a*, prostitutes. There seem to be no alternative categories available than those questioning her gender and her morals, to classify women's agency beyond the sanctioned gender norm. Below Rahwa expresses her frustration about the limitations implicit in these categorisations.

Rahwa's¹⁰ voice is intense, but low, hardly audible on the tape. She comes from a rural village in the lowlands, *q'olla*. This is her second year as a student in the market town. She had just started eight-grade. She lives with a friend, a girl from her village, in a small rented house. "The very fact that we go to school in the market town is for many synonymous with being *shermut'a*, a prostitute. If the girl starts to put on weight, people will talk about her and say: 'how many men has she slept with?' If I'm seen in the street talking to a boy: 'oh, that's her boyfriend', people would say. When I put on weight and my breasts got bigger, people said: 'she is not a virgin; she has slept with a man.' But people do not know!" Rahwa says agitated.

It is believed that when a girl starts to be sexually active her body will become more womanlike, and that she will put on weight because sex is thought to be good for her. Thus sexual practice transforms her from a girl to a woman. There are no institutionalised rites dealing with the transition from childhood to adulthood other than marriage. Traditionally the girl will enter this union as a virgin; her husband acting as the catalyst for her womanhood. According to Kidane¹¹ (20), a male high-school student, a woman risks being stigmatised as *shermut'a* by the mere fact that she has been operating outside the control of her family. As well as attempting to obstruct promiscuous sexual behaviour, this category is used both to prevent as well as belittle women's agency.

Rahwa says, when it comes to boys, "*ane suqh' ile*, 'I keep quiet', in this case understood as refraining from sexual activity. If her family knew about such a relation, they would start an insulting campaign and threaten to exclude her. If she cares about her reputation, she has to stay away from male acquaintances until she marries. Education is her choice. Rahwa's parents

¹⁰ Recorded interview 9th October 2002. Her name is altered.

¹¹ Recorded interview 23rd September 2002. His name is altered.

Left: Rodas' baptism eighty days after her birth. Women are considered unclean till after the baptism and she cannot enter the church during this period. *Abo nebsi*, literally 'spiritual father', and the household's assigned priest, *q'eshi* Tadelle is conducting the ceremony. *Haleq'a* Mezarebti, a deacon, is assisting. During the ceremony he was in charge of the cross, and at different intervals in the ceremony he repositioned himself to make sure he was within the view of my camera.

Right: Rodas on her mother Telaynesh' lap at the baptism party in their home after the church ceremony. Telaynesh' husband left to find work in New Zealand. She was pregnant with Rodas when he left. July 2002.



wanted her to marry. When the first offer of marriage came at the age of eleven, she returned the *maeteb*, the silver cross and ring that in the rural villages are given to the woman at the *h'ets'e*, engagement. The *maeteb* is to be worn on her lower chest in a black band around her neck, to show she has given her promise to a man. Neither did she accept the new dress she was brought as an engagement gift. "I threw it all. I said I did not want it," Rahwa says. Her parents were angry. "Why? Why? What are you doing now that you have studied?" they asked. If they had forced her to marry she assures me she would have run away; disappeared. Then she asks me: "Did I do the right thing?" I think she is strong, not less courageous than the women fighters choosing *berekha*, the 'wilderness' and the armed struggle during the Tigrayan revolution.

Rahwa's resistance however must be seen against her knowledge of the challenges subsistence peasants face in rural Tigray; with increased pressure on land, escalating soil erosion and recurring droughts, and thus the lack of possibilities to stay on. Her parents were among the new settlers that inhabited the lowlands, *q'olla* in the valley basins in north-western Tigray in 1951 E.C. (1959). They came from the highlands in the eastern part of Tigray, and made new lives for themselves and their families in what was then still unpopulated areas. They build their houses and ploughed new land. It was a land of plenty. Her family was well off then. Her mother and father shared the land between them when they divorced; it will not be enough to live off if it is divided again. Earlier on, in what should have been the rainy season, Rahwa had told me: "we will die of hunger". She was helping a neighbour weeding as they ploughed the dusty soil. By the look on her face I knew it was not a joke. I later got to know it was not just her fear, but a collectively shared fear steadily increasing as the small rains had not come in April, and the major rains in June, July and August were not only one and a half months late, but stopped as usual around the Ethiopian New Year, in the beginning of September. Rahwa is too young however, to remember the big famine in 1984-85. She says her mother has told her about it. They were able to borrow from others to get themselves through it. Her older sister describes their future prospect, coming from a family with fourteen children, as "*h'emaqh' eddel*, bad fate". Rahwa thinks her chance is through education, but is afraid of failing.

Social sanctions and cultural coercion are implicit in the negative categorisation of women when they are perceived as exceeding the gender norm. However, it is important to see compliance not only as resignation, but to understand cultural norms' interrelatedness with access to resources (Bourdieu 1977), a point I will discuss below. Rahwa represents a new generation of young women who actively influence the course of their own lives by insisting on education, and thus a wider range of knowledges than previous generations; mainly to escape poverty. Their strategy might be seen as less political than their mothers and older sisters, who joined the liberation front to liberate the Tigrayan people, and explicitly their women. This new generation of women nevertheless challenge the sanctioned category 'woman' with their mere forthrightness, as did the female fighters during the revolution.

Medhin (39) (right), a widow, peasant and head of household, with her neighbour Awetash (50) stretching their backs while weeding the newly plowed sorghum field. When the two women realise that I have photographed them off guard, they immediately rearrange themselves and demand to be photographed properly. They are both wearing last years fashionable dresses now turned into working-clothes. July 2002.

Privatised experience; Saba's story

The participation of women adds legitimacy and symbolic power to war efforts, but while equality between men and women is favoured during the war, civilian society encourages gender difference (E. Barth 2002). Women constituted thirty percent of the fighters within EPLF and TPLF (Hammond 1999, Hale 2001) during the liberation struggles of the 1970s and 80s in Ethiopia. Women's participation gave a promise of changes in relation to their position in society (Pedersen 1999). According to Young: "[o]vercoming the age-old fetters on the role of women was a major concern of the TPLF from its earliest days (...), in part because attacking female oppression was consistent with its liberation philosophy" (Young 1997: 178).¹² He emphasises however, that women's participation must be understood against the actual need TPLF had for all human resources of Tigray in the struggle against the *Derg*.¹³ In peacetime however, fighter-women's contributions seem to be under-communicated, not least by themselves. This silencing implicitly disqualifies their experience and knowledge gained as fighters and women, on return to civilian life. However, women's life-stories suggest that their agency challenged normative gender practices also prior to the Tigrayan revolution.

I had known Saba (45) slightly for nine years, but it never occurred to me she had been with the Tigrayan fighters during the revolution. As a matter of fact, she never told me she was, and I never considered asking her. She was always busy with her daily work, going to the mill, making *injerra*, the pancake or *sewa*, the millet beer, never sitting down during the whole coffee ceremony; filling the time between the three obligatory brews with work. When I tell her, "you don't know about sitting down", she laughs wholeheartedly. Saba is a head of household living together with her old mother, her daughter and her daughter's children between one and eleven years of age. The women squeeze a living from the sale of *sewa* and *injerra*.

There are no obvious signs of Sabas' time in the field, as a TPLF cadre, as a propagator for the revolution specialising on women's issues among the people of Tigray. She plaits her hair the way most women do, tight and released at the neck in a bushy fan, wears the same kind of customary dress with tight bodice and full skirt, and she would always take her *nets'ela*, the white shawl, when running outside. She is left with the burden of poverty, with heavy work, with traditional women's work. Still, she is confident; her story comes in a steady flow, while

¹² In the mid-1980's TPLF decided to restrict the number of women being recruited, in spite of resentment from the women themselves. John Young (1997) suggests this decision was a response to unease in the rural villages about women recruitment. TPLF was dependent on a massive support from the peasants in its revolutionary project. The peasant values subsequently placed limits on, and gave shape to, the course of TPLF's military campaign as well as its program to transform agrarian society.

¹³ Young's point is supported by the fact that with the TPLF-based coalition EPRDF in power, Ethiopian women were not enrolled for combat in the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998-2000), as were Eritrean women. The latter made up between 15 and 20 % (Hale 2001) of their country's national forces during the two-year war. On the Ethiopian side, literally speaking, there was no lack of *manpower* this time around.



most others I interviewed soon stopped to wait for my next question. Saba¹⁴ starts her story by telling how, as a thirteen year old, she had run away from the marriage her parents had arranged during the pre-marriage period when the couple will start sleeping together. Running away, as Rahwa claimed she would if her parents had insisted on her marriage, both has been, and continues to be a potential strategy for girls and young women in Tigray to escape the norms of their gender. However, Saba married another man she liked soon after.¹⁵ But when her children were still small, she decided to join the fighters. Saba came back from the field to her house every night to sleep there, keeping up her role as mother and wife; hiding her equipment as she entered the town. When her youngest son was weaned, she left the children at home with her mother, and went to stay permanently in the field. Her husband returned to his family's village and moved together with another woman. "I gave two children to the fighters, as a contribution to the struggle," Saba says, "first my daughter that had finished fifth grade and then my oldest son. However, they returned my daughter, but kept my son. They told me I should not risk losing both of them." Saba continued to work for the Women's Association of Tigray,¹⁶ after the struggle till she was told, "you do not have education", and had to quit. She suddenly found herself disqualified after so many years of dedication. Her lack of modern education, made it impossible for Saba to compete with both ex-fighter women and men when civil positions were distributed among comrades after the revolution. Thus, neither the women themselves nor society at large seem to have been able to fully exploit the qualifications of the fighter women in peacetime.

However, Saba talks proudly of the Tigrayan fighters' uniform attire and hairstyle that made it difficult to distinguish between men and women fighters during the struggle, even though it made people question their sex: "are they girls or boys?" When I ask her why she quit wearing the trousers and conformed to the traditional women's style for hair and dress after the struggle, she answers with a question: "What about it? ... The war was over!" I ask her whether people would have insulted her if she had continued the *tegadelti*¹⁷-style, afro-hair and trousers. She says, "*ewe!* yes! People would ask: 'does she sit when peeing?'" implicitly questioning her gender-identity. Saba has not forgotten how to handle a *kalashen* though. I watch her while she confidently detaches the bullet magazine, and puts away the semi-automatic weapon belonging to one of the guests in her *sewabét*. She notices that I watch her, and smiles. Likewise, when I

¹⁴ Recorded interview 15th october, 2002. Her name is altered.

¹⁵ If the woman is not a virgin, marriage is established without much ceremony. Marriage can likewise be easily dissolved. What might take extensive time in the legal system is the sharing of property.

¹⁶ *Maheber Dekki Anestiyo Tigray*, WAT, was established as a committee during the struggle within TPLF, but have since 1996 been an independent NGO. It organises approximately 400.000 women in Tigray.

¹⁷ Fighter: *tegadelti* (plural), *tegadalay* (male, singular), *tegadalit* (female, singular).



confront the ex-fighter Lula¹⁸ (35) with my observation that there are no visible signs showing who was a *tegadalit*, a fighter woman, during the struggle, contrary to men who still might carry their *kalashen*, around, she says: “it is good. ... Coming back from the struggle, women left the war behind. ... We [the fighter-women] are marked by the war inside our bodies; other signs serve no purpose.” She had shown me photographs from the field, of herself in uniform with male fighter compatriots. Now Lula stresses: “we are not different from the other women; we look the same, wear the same kind of dress and plait our hair.”

Saba agrees that she exposes no signs of her past history with the *Weyane*, with the fighters of the Tigrayan revolution. “In this place though, people know. Others do not know. There are no signs,” she says. However, the tattoos marking her throat with horizontal lines and ending in a big elaborate cross on her chest, are visible traditional signs imprinted on her body enhancing female beauty, as well as her identity as an Orthodox Christian. The traditional *nets’ela* she is wearing is a gift from a beloved sister. She wears it because she really likes to use it, she assures me, thus implicitly emphasising that she perceives complying with this gendered convention not as coercion, but as a subjective choice. She puts her *nets’ela* in a demonstrative heap around her head as she runs off to the mill.

Saba’s story is also about famine, as part of a collective story of suffering, and a personal one, struggling to make ends meet for herself and her family. It is a story of washing gold in the rivers in *berekha*, the ‘wilderness’ to pay for one year’s back-lag on the house-rent; of walking on foot with twelve donkeys to May Tsebri, two days walk away, buying cereals to sell in the town. She decided not to follow the others to Sudan during the big famine (1984-85) however. “The *Weyane* said we should all go to Sudan, but we said we would stay here. We told them if we go there, we will end up as prostitutes to make a living.” She says people are afraid now of another famine; the crop is drying in the fields before it is ripe, the rains having come too late and stopped too early. The price on grain is already on its way upward, which means she will get less out of her own work because she is afraid of raising the price on the *injerra* and *sewa* she produces and sells.

Saba sold *sewa* before the revolution. She still sells *sewa*. Looking at her daily life, she might be seen as someone who is back where they started. In spite of her efforts during the struggle to improve women’s lives, she still has to struggle to secure only a minimum living for herself and her family. With no education, she is stuck with traditional women’s work; making *injerra* and brewing *sewa*. Saba had worked for a revolution that emphasised education also for women. She happened to be disqualified by the fact that she lacked it. Her experience and knowledge from the field did not qualify her to work for the women’s organisation, having originated in *berekha* during the revolution. In spite of this, Saba does not strike me as a powerless

¹⁸ Recorded interview 16th October, 2002. Her name is altered.



Two of Medhin's daughters, Freyni and Workey, are helping to weed as the field is ploughed by her oldest son and the local priest, *q'eshi* Kidanemariam. Workey (15) later asks me to photograph her in the market town where she goes to school and lives with a classmate from her village. She has refused her first offer of marriage from Teberrih and Kasay's oldest son. Instead she wants to continue her education.

woman. It is precisely this point, seen against her life-story as a whole, that makes me interpret the subduing of her fighter-identity not essentially as resignation, but as a strategy to be able to compete at all, for the scarce resources available in the local community. Her life-story shows that she is able to act, and likewise that she is capable of resorting to different strategies in differing situations.

I ask Saba¹⁹: "you gave so many years to the *Weyane*, and the work for women's issues, what did the revolution give you?" She answers: "before when I made *sewa* I could make a living from it, I could even have built my own house, I could have bought nice clothes and shoes; even gold. Instead I went to *berekha*; I'm a poor I tell you. ... I was working for *Weyane*, I was working for the women's organisation; I thought the revolution would give development for the people. I went to bed without food sometimes. I struggled. But the *Weyane* could not help me. When I remember it, I'm very sad because there was nothing there for me. Sometimes I earn a little money; sometimes I still go to bed without having eaten. Anyway, I'm alive," she says. "Sometimes I think that if I had been working hard, or had married a rich man and we had worked hard, I would have been rich by now. I have tried different strategies with making *sewa*, making *injerra*, or tea, but there is no improvement. However, if I don't work I'm tired. I like working. If I don't work, I'm troubled. ... I worked to educate both men and women during the struggle. I was happy when the freedom came. The combat fighters got paid when they were demobilised. I got nothing. It's fate," Saba says, suggesting that this apparent iniquity had other causes than an inadequate revolution.

"I will continue to try, though," Saba assures me. She had just arranged an *ek'ub*, a kind of loan/lottery rotating among a group of women, to get money to buy new utensils for her work. According to Dessalegn Rahmato (1991), both the *ek'ub* and the *idir*²⁰, can be seen as part of women's 'mutual support network', the *ek'ub* making it possible for women to pool resources. The *ek'ub* is rotated as a social event spaced at set intervals. All participants contribute a given sum of money and the total will be won by one woman till everyone has won once, then the lottery will start all over again with all the participants. Dessalegn further comments that these traditional networks have usually been seen as mere work sharing arrangements, and their "potential for greater economic security for women and for grass-roots organizational possibilities have been largely ignored" (Dessalegn 1991: 31). Hence, this traditional network is one strategy which gives a certain backing to women's agency in constrained economic circumstances. Likewise, women's *de jures* rights might provide them with access to land

¹⁹ Recorded interview 7th November, 2002.

²⁰ The household or women-based *idir* is a network of kin or neighbours, or both, which is mobilised on the occasions of death and mourning. The household where death has stricken would be provided for with food, drink and cash to meet the expenses of a funeral and the serving of a large number of guests (usually counted in hundreds) that would come to pay their condolences and mourn with the family (Dessalegn 1991).



through inheritance. She also have a chance of retrieving her *gezmi*, dowry after divorce, if she is willing to pursue the task through a legal process. These latter structural possibilities also support women's potential for economic self-sustenance.²¹

Modern versus traditional influences

The history of the Tigray region, comprising of struggles for power and fragile social relationships (including marriages, a point I will return to in chapter 6), wars, recurring famines and poverty, has made resilience a relevant cultural strategy. I think this point is important to understand how women, like Saba and Lula, were able to join the fighters in the first place, and thus avoid interpreting their agency as only a matter of modernity²². Even though the gendered division of labour in Tigray has prevailed through a people's revolution, the apparent co-existence of traditional and modern influences do implicate at least potential choices between 'traditions of knowledge' (Barth 2002) as well as potential access to different 'economic sectors' (Fassil 1993).

Nevertheless, modernity is often understood to challenge traditional gender roles. Modern education represents one such challenge to female gender norms not only because of access to a particular knowledge, but due to its influence on timing as well as spatial circumstances in women's lives. The Tigrayan subsistence peasants could be seen, as I have argued in chapter 1, as economically trapped in their ecological situation. Education for their children gives the promise of accessing the modern economic sector, and a potentially less harsh life, or even the only option when there is not enough land to go around to everybody, as is the case with Rahwa and her siblings. However, that schooling for their daughters represents a challenge is obvious in one peasant's remark, talking about the fact that they had to send them to the nearest town after fourth grade. "If she goes to school in the market town on Monday she will be sleeping with a man on Tuesday", he says, pointing to the fear that daughters would lose their virginity before they are married, and therewith their value as an economic-relational

²¹ Credit schemes are available also for women through REST (Relief Society of Tigray) and its credit institution Debdebit.

²² Modernity is often ideologically understood in an evolutionary sense where "modernity remains the terminus towards which non-Western peoples constantly edge" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993: xii). But as Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders state: "Modernity comes with no single built-in telos, no single rationalizing *raison d'être*: modernity, if it ever was a single entity, has gone in innumerable and often unanticipated directions" (Moore & Sanders 2001: 12).

Knowing Workey and her friends' both from the village and in the market town, their poses make me think they are familiar with different ways of life.

Left: Akhberet (15) has put on her finest dress and chooses to pose with a schoolbook to show her identification with a more modern way of life than she grew up with in her rural village.

Right: Abrehet (18) likewise poses in a dress fashionable in the market town, but chooses a traditional artefact, used as a head-decoration for the young bride at her wedding. In the market town and other towns it is used as a cultural artefact decorating homes.



asset for their families. His statement also bears connotations of a wild female sexuality²³ that has to be controlled, mainly by others. Thus, marriage at an early age is of utmost importance for parents, realising they would not be able to control their daughters' sexuality forever. Access to education however, tends to postpone marriage for girls and implicitly childbirth, and opens up for changes in gendered practices, and consequently gender identity.

That the Ethiopian society is not able to absorb all those hopeful pupils with a 10th or 12th grade exam, and offer them meaningful work according to their expectations, leaves large segments of a generation in limbo; no longer fully part of, or identifying with, the traditional economic sector, but not fully accepted into the modern as wage-labourers. Their hope is often that someone would happen to come along and take them abroad. One seventeen year old girl, when questioned about her plan to break off her education at 9th grade to leave for Lebanon²⁴ to work as a domestic servant, answered that staying to finish 10th grade made no difference; she expected to work as a domestic servant in either case. But for many, like Rahwa above, education is perceived as a way forward, as was the revolution for women like Saba and Lula who joined the armed liberation struggle.

When I ask the female ex-fighter Lula²⁵ what the revolution gave her, she emphasises the knowledge she gained through expanding the range of her activities as well as through spacial mobility. Women participating in the struggle on equal terms with men escaped the cultural

²³ Female circumcision is interpreted as a practice concerned with curbing women's sexuality. Following National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia, *Baseline Survey on Harmful Traditional Practices in Ethiopia*, 1998, the frequency of *nay gwal megraz*, female circumcision, practised among Orthodox Christians as well as Muslims, was estimated to 50 % in Tigray when the survey was conducted in 1997, but is generally believed to be much less. *Clitoridectomy*, which means pricking, or partly or entirely removal of the clitoris, and *excision*, an additional removal of the labia minora, are the most common practises in Tigray according to the Baseline Study. People I asked claimed the practice was discontinued during the revolution, but admitted that if it still exists it will be done in secrecy. Circumcision would traditionally be practised, both for girls and boys, between the seventh and twelfth day after birth. One woman in the market town, when asked about the practice, said it was based on a fear that the clitoris would grow too long and become more like a male penis and therefore would become both ugly and not least disturbing during sexual intercourse. She herself had not been circumcised because, as she said, she had been "circumcised by Mariyam [Saint Mary]", and that this would secure that her clitoris did not grow. Boys who are not circumcised are believed not be able to penetrate the hymen of the virgin bride. The practice could thereby be seen to enhance culturally prescribed femininity in girls and likewise masculinity in boys. However, being 'circumcised by Maryiam' constitutes in my opinion a possibility within culture itself, to avoid the practice, as the judgement of the size of the clitoris of a seven to twelve days old baby girl, and thereby the necessity to circumcise, could be subject to individual interpretation. The Baseline Survey does not explicate if those 'circumcised by Maryiam' have classified themselves as circumcised or not, and thereby how they are counted in the survey.

²⁴ Illegal trafficking from Ethiopia has become a lucrative business. The girls are often sent to the Middle East, Lebanon, Dubai and Saudi Arabia. It is estimated that 1.000 girls are recruited to Beirut monthly. The UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) anti-trafficking unit, says girls are targeted by traffickers at colleges or in poor districts of towns and cities, and that they often have not completed their studies (IRIN October 14, 2002: www.peacewoman.org).

²⁵ Recorded interview 7th November, 2002. Her name is altered.



Mozey (15) poses with her hair let loose, which would usually signify low morals for a girl. Material markers are often included in the photographs to enhance a certain personal quality; Mozey holds a glass with some red yarn in it and says it signifies a flower, and I guess; beauty.

legacy of women's passivity and submissiveness, at least in the field. Lula says, "if I had not been a *tegadalit*, I wouldn't have learned anything. I would have continued to be subordinate to men. Now I know the *h'eggi*, the [Ethiopian] law. Now I am experienced. ... My age mates from the village," Lula continues, "we were married at the same time. They have given birth. To me they seem more like my mother. How many children do they have, seven or eight? They only know about giving birth, they do not know how to manage their upbringing. If I had stayed in the village I would have borne seven or eight children by now. The government has not treated us differently, but we [the fighters] have gained knowledge. ... I went to fight, I thought I might die, but I did not. I fought day and night, day and night; we stayed in different places, through that I gained my knowledge. With this experience my father could never have made me marry someone I didn't know, I wouldn't have gone there. Now, if I want a man I will choose myself!" However, the social pressure put on the fighter-women to subdue their self-presentations, including their knowledge gained from the field, prevents the community as a whole, and other women in particular, to gain knowledge from their experiences. And consequently, as Hilary Nwokeabia (2002) claims concerning the secrecy surrounding certain traditional knowledge systems – the knowledge usually being transferred to one person, son or daughter, or confined to only one group of people – the potentially innovative process for the whole community is slowed down. Hence Lula's past and the knowledge she gained remains hers and becomes nobody else's.

To explain this apparent set-back, Kjetil Tronvoll (1998) notes in a study from Mai Weini, a village in highland Eritrea, the need to maintain cultural institutions of integration "to withstand the pressures and changes brought upon the village by external factors related to war, drought, and hunger" (Tronvoll 1998: 260). However, as these factors are themselves the cause of change, it is important to understand this 'cultural stand-still', according to Tronvoll, from the positioning of the 'cultural brokers' who *left*, not only to escape Ethiopian state terror, but also "based on grievance related to gender and generational/structural inequities determined by traditional cultural institutions in the village[s]" (Tronvoll 1998: 262). In Tigray, as in Eritrea, these young entrepreneurs escaped to Europe or joined the fighters in TPLF or EPLF. Even if the struggles indeed depended on interaction and cooperation with rural populations, the liberation fronts – and I would like to emphasise this point – were based in *berekha*, the hot, arid and basically unpopulated areas of Tigray and Eritrea, and as such,

"did not have any significant, direct impact on social transformation within the village[s]. Instead of working from within the system and to create social change, (...) [the villages were left] under the continuous domain of the older generations. Thus the 'establishment' in the villages were never really confronted by a new generation of aspiring young villagers" (Tronvoll 1998: 262-3); men *and* women.

However, Rahwa's hope for a life different from that of her parents' in the rural village is not unrelated to the aspirations of a revolution promising equality and education, also for women.

Akhberet poses again on a later occasion before setting off to her family's village in the rural area; she wears a more traditional dress than in the previous photographs, suggesting an identity management relating to both traditional and modern spheres.



So instead of seeing women as resigning under traditionalism, I think it is fruitful to see how these women's strategies are not an either or, but are different choices in different situations across time; and that the women are not necessarily risking everything at the same time. This point also suggests that there is no plain and unambiguous process of transferring cultural norms to individual agents. Following Daniel Yon (1999), the concept of culture,

“as the hidden hand that guards and disciplines those whom it produces, (...) overlooks how individuals may act upon discourse and resist the discipline by taking up a range of contradictory and ambivalent positions in relation to the objects that are made of culture” (Yon 1999: 30).

Rahwa has gone against her parents' wish in choosing an education, but she is not simultaneously risking her parents' exclusion by dating boys at school. Saba left for the field to fight for the revolution; coming back she complies with a traditional lifestyle, the gain from continuing to perform her *tegedalit* identity is calculated to gain little in comparison to the stigma it creates.

New knowledge; old symbols

The female fighters' contribution during the revolution could be interpreted as an innovative leap, as acquiring new knowledge as women exceeding the limits of the traditional gender role. Thus widening the scope for women's agency and suggesting new premises for being a woman. By doing so, the fighter-women challenged the culturally sanctioned concept of 'woman' as mothers and submissive wives. However, venturing to the 'wilderness' to fight for the revolution, Saba and Lula (and other fighter-women with them), have not managed to render the value of their experience understandable through the female categories culturally available, and thus their experiences are excluded from accepted womanhood. This incorporation into a cultural symbol-system is what Gananath Obeyesekere (1981), in *Medusa's Hair*, sees as a necessary step to move an individual experience from a private sphere to acceptance in the wider community. This would be hard-earned in the Tigrayan context, where deviance from normative gender practices makes women either 'men' or 'prostitutes.' However, gender roles in the Tigrayan context place limits both on men's and women's agency to publicly pursue alternative strategies that imply a break with sanctioned gender identity. Alternative experiences thereby remain privatised, and a process of collective reflection and incorporation into shared knowledge is halted. However, to be able to see the empowerment implicit in Rahwa and Saba's strategies, I think it is important to consider both complying with and resisting traditional gender norms as implicating agency. Listening to women's life-stories made me aware of the fact that women's agency certainly reaches beyond sanctioned gender identity as symbolised with fulfilling motherhood and conducting the coffee ceremony.

My argument in this chapter has established that women's (and men's) agency must be understood as culturally bounded by sanctioned gender identity based in the sexual division of labour. Focusing on actors' resilience to manage their often difficult life situations, shows that

even if women seem to be culturally confined within the limits of normative gender identity, compliance and under-communication are precisely strategies that make agency possible without arousing too much social sanction. This is not to say that men cannot resort to similar strategies, but whereas men traditionally have been concerned with confirming their gender identity by harbouring *h'abbo*, being courageous in battles and outstanding in litigations, and thereby being 'seen' by others, women's agency beyond the gender norm must be understood as concerned with subduing their forthrightness, and thus with finding spaces for agency where it might not be noticed.

However, I am not proposing that women are perceived as silent, rather the contrary; women's self-presentation can indeed be cheerfully noisy, and their sharp tongues can be feared by men and women alike. This fact does not however oppose my argument, since these features are perceived as within the confines of their gender role. Likewise, I think it is important that women's agency in Tigray is not understood merely as a matter of modernity versus traditionalism, but is seen against the ability individual actors always have, at least to a certain extent, to influence their situation (Giddens 1991). It is a fact that girls and young women have been opposing cultural constraints by running away, both before and after the revolution. But while they traditionally have run away to become nuns, or risked prostitution in the towns, the revolution gave them an alternative site to run to.

In chapter 5 I will ground my discussion in body-practice in the Tigrayan context, and the link between practice and identity. Further, life-stories have been a gateway into local discourse on self and autonomy, providing causal explanations with implications for individual agency. Even if local discourse on witchcraft might make people subdue their self-presentations, this tendency cannot be understood to prevent agency as such. Rather it might add to the need for mobility and flexibility in social interaction.

Chapter 5

BODY-PRACTICE, DISCOURSE ON SELF; LIFE-STORIES

As I have already discussed, I am intrigued by the stereotype photographic images of starving Ethiopians, but also by the perhaps less obvious; the stereotype images of Africans focusing on what is perceived as the richness in African traditions. Looking at the spectacular coffee-table versions of Leni Riefenstahl's (1976), or Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher's (1999) monumental photographic work, made me realise that these visual extremes might have one thing in common; the focus on body. In both cases *they* are represented as the embodied 'Others' who, in Donna Haraway's wording, are not allowed "*not to have a body*" (Haraway 1988 : 575, *italics in original*). In my opinion, these stereotype images, of people either dying or dancing – the latter often reduced to a cultural commodity – exclude not only the historical and political (Wright 2000), but also the specific subjective circumstances concerning a person's self-identity.

This is not to state that focusing on body and embodiment is not useful in a social anthropological context. The advantages, according to Andrew Strathern and Michael Lambek (1998) are firstly, that embodiment manages to incorporate both the "intersection of the biological and the cultural in the realm of lived experience" (Lambek et al. 1998: 13). Secondly, it manages to incorporate cultural encoding and inscription of memory on the body. Thirdly, both the cultural processes influencing the body and the work of the body influencing culture are incorporated. Fourthly, the term is useful in an approach to symbolism and classification. And lastly, it "implies agency in terms of willed bodily actions rather than their passive performance of roles" (Lambek et al. 1998: 13). In other words, "[i]t is the body that provides the most immediate and physical point of reference for the individual's relations with herself, with others and with the world" (R. Devisch in Moore 1999: 6). With these points in mind, together with the fact that I was literally focusing on embodied persons through my photographic practice, my attention was drawn to practices and discourses relating to the embodied person in the Tigrayan context. This focus has been useful to gain understanding of what might influence a person and her preferred self-presentation. Likewise, how perceptions of bodily integrity and autonomy have implications for individual agency. This perspective makes it possible to interpret the body as a 'field' for embodied culture and intentionality alike, for 'structuring structures' (Bourdieu 1977) as well as subjectivity, embodying the very tension between self and society.

Even though famine is a recurring threat in Tigrayans lives, fasting remains an important feature of Orthodox practice reinforcing a Christian identity. Below I will discuss the moral implications of this practice, as well as clarifying divine limits to individual agency.



Body regimes¹ and moral implications

While the Muslims would fast through the month of Ramadan, the Orthodox Christians practise extensive fasting, in total, more than half the year. *Ts'om*, fasting in the Orthodox Christian context in Ethiopia, means consorting to a strict vegetarian diet, and thus avoidance of all animal products such as meat, milk products and eggs. There is ambivalence as to whether this should also include fish, so people would often eat fish during fasting when and where fish is available. Michele² (35), a local merchant, who practiced three years with the priests from the age of fourteen or fifteen, explains that fasting is a practice to make you remember God; a sign that you believe in him and are committed to follow his ruling, the Ten Commandments.

Fasting is practised every Wednesday and Friday, plus, at longer intervals before a major church celebration. The Lent before Easter, *ts'om arbea*, literally meaning forty days of fasting, lasts for fifty-five days. The other long fasting periods, usually two to four weeks, would come before *Guh'ariya*, the commemoration of the disciples, and Christmas, two weeks after the Protestant/Catholic celebration. *Felseta*, the toughest fasting of the year, is before the celebration of Mariyam, Virgin Mary, requiring that people do not drink or eat anything before the church ceremony is finished in the afternoon. The priests in the market town occasionally visit peoples' homes to check if fasting is observed. However, fasting periods or not, going to church in the morning always requires that you have not eaten breakfast beforehand.

Whenever I asked people why it is good to fast, I was given different explanations, like 'it is good for your body not to eat meat always', implicating a preference for meat in the diet if possible. The rural population would often have to eat fasting food anyway, only enjoying meat on special holidays. Children are exempted from fasting, but would usually eat the same as their parents. When I asked a village priest to explain why fasting is so essential, he asked me if I practice fasting. When I answered negatively he refused to tell me anything about it. I was later told that the priests had advised people in my Tigrayan husband's rural village not to eat in our home, for the same reason; we do not fast, and could contaminate the others with our food. However, Muslims and Christians are allowed to eat each other's food as long as it does not include meat. A child gains religious identity from the home she grows up in. If her father is a Muslim, but she grows up with her Christian mother, the child will be inscribed as a Christian through Christian practises, including food. Orthodox Christians who have spent years in Arab countries participating in Arab food traditions would make themselves subject to *mech'edar*, a second baptism, to be cleansed when they return home to Ethiopia. People are usually extremely careful with cooking utensils used for fasting food; they should not be mixed with those used for cooking meat, and should not be washed in the same water either.

¹ I have borrowed the term from Anthony Giddens (1991: 99) in *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

² Recorded interview 6th November, 2002. His name is altered.

A photographic situation: efforts to make an appropriate self-presentation. A tarpaulin was chosen as backdrop and handled by the young spectators coming to watch the event. Eventually they were all given the opportunity to present themselves. January 2001.



Likewise, fasting can be understood to have positive consequences for people's health, that the regime itself improves health; claimed by those who say they feel better when fasting. This however is not the main reason for fasting; it is a display of one's dedication to an almighty God, so that He will ensure that a long good healthy life, as well as an afterlife, is *given*. This point has implications in my discussion on individual agency. The Orthodox Christian bound in a strong relationship to God throughout all her actions. Despite her potential as an individual actor, her worldly actions would not be considered sufficient to reach her goals. As the influential late 13th century, Ethiopian monk from Shoa, Tekle Haymanot, taught: "[i]f your first concern is the spiritual, God will provide the material" (Mercier 1997: 64). And, as Rahwa³ assures me, keeping to Orthodox practices is a moral obligation, to reduce evil in the world. And she continues: "I go to church on the saints' days, I do the fasting." What is the purpose I ask her? "It is our religion. It is written in the Book, *mets'h'af*⁴. The priests say that if we do not fast, God will not consider us true Christians. If we fast Saint Michael will ensure that *sheyt'an*, Satan is killed," she tells me. "It means, if I fast, *h'at'iyat* will decrease; there will be less sin. If you are a true Christian you should wear a *maeteb*, sign, like a cross or just a thread around your neck, and do fasting. If not, *h'at'iyat* increases, and when you die you will end up on the fire. Our Book says like this," Rahwa tells me. "I go to church on Sundays, on Mariyam (21st every month) and Michael (12th every month)⁵. I like Mariyam and Saint Michael. At Easter I stay the whole night at the church, from Friday to Saturday. I look at the pictures in the church, and *yseged*, I bow."

The liturgy in the Orthodox Church is performed in the ancient *Geez*, a language hardly anyone understands, except for the clergy. This does not mean that Rahwa does not know the holy stories, and what is expected of her in relation to bodily exegesis at different church rituals and celebrations. The significance resides in the fact that the *q'edassé*, the liturgy, the singing, and the sound of the drums, as well as the religious paintings that decorate the inside of the churches, are all open to individual interpretation. According to Anthony Cohen, the potency of symbols lies exactly in their capacity to be made "to fit the circumstances of the individual" (Cohen 1994: 18). And, that within the highly influential Orthodox Church, which demands strict compliance with its norms and subjugation to its practices and body regimes such as fasting reinforcing a Christian identity, resides a space for individual experience and subjective interpretation.

³ Recorded interview 9th October, 2002. Her name is altered.

⁴ The Orthodox Church relates to a multitude of different Holy Scriptures. In common speech these are most often not differentiated and merely called *mets'h'af*, Book in singular, not plural.

⁵ The dates are according to the Ethiopian Calendar.

Agency and causality in a relational perspective

An older male peasant provided me with an instructive example to understand how agency and causality could be understood in the Tigrayan Orthodox context. He told me that he had fathered thirteen children with two different women, but that it was not the sexual act as such that produced the children; it is God. When I ask him if he has ever considered using contraceptives, he answers angrily, “don’t mention it!” He says God does not like that people want to control childbirth, and that God would be able to surpass the preventive means, for instance, by making the condom burst.

The Western attitude that agency is on the part of the individual, ‘if only I try hard enough’, or ‘if I am clever enough’, I will make it, and if I do not, it was my own fault, are not applicable in the Tigrayan cultural context. Seen from an Orthodox Christian perspective I would have to keep two lines of action going at the same time; my attempts in the physical world to improve my life situation, as well as securing my relation to God through sanctioned Christian practices, in order to be sure that my actions might *work*. If I do not succeed the most usual interpretation would be that I am not putting enough energy into the spiritual sphere of life, or that God has other plans for me. If God does not approve, my actions will be disqualified anyway. As an elderly peasant woman said, “we work and work, year after year, but there is no improvement.” This does not mean that she is unaware of working against all odds in an extremely harsh environment, but rather points to the fact that people’s efforts in Tigray are rarely enough to improve their lives. As another peasant in his thirties said, when I asked him on his third child’s first birthday if he considered he had enough children: “if I have one or ten children I would be poor anyway”.

As Edward LiPuma (1998) emphasises, cultures differ critically in “the ontological status, visibility, and force granted individual/relational aspects of persons, especially as these appear in the construction of their own comparative discourses about persons, such as justifications or explanations for actions” (LiPuma 1998: 57). Causality in the Tigrayan context must be understood as a moral category with relational implications, and differently from how it is perceived under western scientific ideology, as basically mechanical. Orthodox Christianity represents a strong belief in fate, which can be interpreted to discourage innovating thinking and practice; a fatalism that is based on the assumption that God’s will, not people’s efforts, is what makes a difference in worldly matters, making God a powerful agent in people’s lives. Seeing no necessary link between work and wealth people could say, as mentioned by Levine: “If a man works hard, he may remain poor. If he does not work hard, he may become wealthy” (Levine 1967: 87), indicating that the matter is up to *eddel*, fate; meaning God.

The following example of a peasant woman, pregnant with her eleventh child, further suggests that the individual cannot be understood as completely submerged in Christian Orthodoxy. The woman in her late thirties told me she was increasingly afraid as the time for delivery approached. The pain had lasted for several days at her previous births. There was



Abrahaley (40) *abo wember*, chairperson of the *tabia*, local administration, was one of fifty-five men from his rural village fighting in the Eritrean-Ethiopian war. Posing before the Ethiopian flag was his choice. July 2002.

three hours walk to the nearest clinic, five to the hospital; if something went wrong she knew she would not make it. Her basic attitude, as taught by the priests, is that of giving birth to all the children that God happens to give; having lost three of them she did not take for granted that all the rest would grow up either. Still, she admitted that if she came through this time, she would start to take the *merfe*, the birth control injection. This might sound as a microscopic change of attitude; in my experience it is not. Her decision shows agency in a moral climate where the individual is taught never to challenge the will of God. As mentioned in chapter 1, even the Tigrayan revolution never challenged the teaching of the Orthodox Church, and thus God's rule.

To account for the specific cultural circumstances of the Tigrayan individual I will therefore go on to elaborate on how the discourse on *buda* designates perceived risks to individual autonomy in the Tigrayan context, as the person could be 'eaten' from within. Likewise Abeba and Rahwa's experiences with *sheyt'an*, Satan and the *buda-zar*⁶, show that they relate to the possibility that their bodies can be taken over by alien others. I will further discuss the implications of these discourses on individual agency.

The *buda*, possessor of the 'evil eye'

The western concept of individuality implicates the body as inhabited by one being only, and intentionality as based on an ideal autonomous actor. These are aspects of the person that cannot be taken for granted in a Tigrayan context, at least not all the time. The discourses on *buda* as the possessor of the 'evil eye', and spirit possession make possible more than one 'I' in one body. Likewise, the discourse on *buda* is dealing with an ambiguous being, said to be able to transform into a hyena at night. I was told the *buda* could cast its 'evil eye' on me, or the ones I love, if I cross its path.

As a child, *aboy* Tadesse⁷ had some basic education with the priests of the Orthodox Church in his village, learning prayers and the *fidet*, the Geez alphabet. "Then," he says, "there was a time when *buda* killed a lot of people in the district. One man was sent for from Gojam to stop it. With him I learned." This knowledge has later been passed on to one of his brothers and his own son, a village priest. *Aboy* Tadesse's knowledge of traditional healing as a *felat'i*, literally meaning one who knows, is with *buda* and *buda-zar*, as well as with snakes and scorpions. He assures me he cannot cure any other diseases, but at one point he says he can give me an herb to put on my lips to make my lover insatiable for me.

When I ask him if *buda* really exists, he answers: "*allo*, they exist. Haven't you heard them?" he asks laughingly, and imitates the sounds of the hyenas that roam the outskirts of the

⁶ The *zar* culture-complex is believed to have originated in Ethiopia and spread from there to Somalia, northern Sudan, Egypt and even the sacred city of Mecca (Lewis 1996), and must be understood regardless of religious belonging and other cosmological commitments.

⁷ Recorded interview 24th September 2002. His name is altered.



market town at night. I ask if there are many *buda* in the area. He answers positively and adds: “especially around Adi Gobri and Tekezze there are lots of them,” he says. He then tells me how his first wife died after having given birth to eight children, four boys and four girls. “*Jinni* hit her,” he says, *jinni* being a general name for evil spirits similar to *sheyt’an*, Satan. “Her body was sucked out,” he says. “That is how it is when *jinni* enters a body.” So I ask him how I can know if I have been taken hold of by *buda*. “You will feel it by abdominal pains,” *aboy* Tadesse explains. I would also find myself in psychological turmoil; crying, laughing, seemingly without cause, and howling like a hyena. The inflicted person is made to inhale smoke from a burning piece of rubber-hose from a bicycle tyre. He explains that people present would then ask, “*men hizuki*, who has taken hold of you?” The inflicted person would then name, the *buda* who has inflicted their misery.

One possible cure consists of drinking a mix of hen excrement and water. As a prophylaxis against *buda*-attacks I am offered to inhale a powder from a special herb through my right nostril; men would inhale through their left, I am told. *Aboy* Tadesse gives me a dose from a little plastic bundle he keeps in his pocket. I immediately begin to cough and my nose starts running. The rest of the day I am convinced I am contracting influenza, by the next day the symptoms are gone. *Aboy* Tadesse gives me *ketab* too, amulets to wear against both *buda* and snakes, insisting that now *buda* cannot get hold of me; and neither can snakes.

The evil power of the *buda* is believed to be transmitted through his or her eyes, by merely looking at you. They can work on their own or on commission from other people, who are jealous of you and want to harm you. Becoming a *buda* is said to be passed on to a child from a parent, who also can decide not to pass it on. *Aboy* Tadesse ends his explanation by laughingly saying that today the Ethiopian government does not believe in the existence of *buda*. It was one of many traditional practises that the Tigrayan revolution wanted to discourage, and subsequently discontinue. However the discourse lives on, as a potential cause of disease and death; but people would not talk about it in my presence unless I brought up the theme myself in what would be perceived as a ‘safe’ setting.

“*Atti zebi*, you hyena,” I am called one day as I pass some youngsters in the street. The remark is offensive and carries the undertone of ‘who are you really’. Being called *buda* and *neq’awit* (another word for *buda*), or *baria*, slave, are the worst verbal offences that can be used against you, and can lead to public repercussion in the form of a fine to be paid by the offender, as high as five hundred birr, or six months imprisonment.

Lula,⁸ who was a *tegadalit*, fighter-woman during the revolution in Tigray, says, when asked if she believes in *buda*: “I can always say it does not exist, but on the other hand I see that the *buda* hurts people. Her voice lowers when she says, “I’m afraid ... but I don’t know. We have

⁸ Recorded interview 16th October, 2002. Her name is altered.



Abrahamaleh demands a photograph of himself in action, like in the war-field, before he again stops to look into the camera. His son Sellye (4) watches the event carefully, and is eventually allowed to pose with his father's weapon.

learned it does not exist, but I see the harm done." On a later occasion in her home I commented on the pain Lula seems to have in her knees while walking. One man present at the time says with a smile that "somebody has thrown their eyes on her." I ask if there is many *buda* around. He answers seriously, "*melliya*, a lot". Kedist⁹ likewise says, "they say there is, but we [my family] have not been taken hold of." When I ask her if she knows who are *buda*, she says, "we know ... now I know..." she makes an estimate of about twenty people in the market town. At least these comments show that people would usually relate to the possibility that *buda* exists.

"We have *buda* in our family"

On the question if *buda* exists, Saba does not hesitate to answer, but her voice lowers¹⁰: "*allo*, there is". When her youngest son got seriously ill a couple of months before, beginning to howl like a mad thing in the middle of the night, they were initially afraid it was *h'angol aso*, brain malaria. Saba managed to collect one hundred birr from friends and family members, and took him to hospital in Shire/Endaselassie the next morning. Even if malaria remained the official story, the blood test showed no signs of malaria, Saba told me. "The doctor said that it was not a disease: 'we do not know this disease. Go!' they told us. ... But I know about protective medicine against *buda*, so I got hold of it", her voice was so low I could hardly hear her.

"We have *buda* in our family," Saba then tells me. "My sister's husband is a *buda*. He came from eastern Tigray when he was a young boy. He worked in our house; he was a clever boy. We did not know then that he was a *buda*. Later he asked to marry my sister. They gave birth to five children. Then he started to take hold of people. One day people put fire to their house, but they all escaped. Now when they came to this place, he is afraid to take hold of anybody because our family knows." Saba continues: "we asked my sister to break the relation with the *buda*. She did not want to. *Feqh'ri hizuwu*¹¹, love had taken hold of her, as with you and your husband," Saba says and laughs. I ask her if she knows who are *buda*? "We all know. I know, but I keep quiet. I do not talk with other people about this issue, if they ask me I say there is no *buda*," Saba says. "If I say something people can sue me, and I have to pay a fine, or I will be imprisoned, because this government says *buda* does not exist. I have likewise been teaching people during the revolution that *buda* does not exist. So I keep quiet ... but I'm afraid," she says, "especially that the *buda* will harm the smaller children." They are vulnerable to *buda* attacks since they cannot talk and therefore cannot reveal the identity of the *buda*.

"The *buda* does not take you in the street," Saba further assures me. By passing me in the street, the *buda* might see me, but not take me there and then she explains. "If the *buda* thinks

⁹ Recorded interview 17th October, 2002. Her name is altered.

¹⁰ Recorded interview 15th October, 2002. Her name is altered.

¹¹ The same word *mehaz*, 'to take hold of', is being used not only in relation to *buda* and spirits, but also in relation to illness, as well as love.

I am beautiful, she might take me later, if we happen to sit together chatting, because of her jealousy, or if I have insulted her or if there is disagreement between our families.” To reveal the *buda*’s identity is usually achieved by coaxing the person to talk, as *aboy* Tadesse had described earlier, by inhaling rubber-smoke. Holding the thumbs and the big toes of the inflicted person, closes the gates against the *buda*’s escape from the body; a name would be given in the *buda*’s own voice. Or, a burning-hot stick could be used to mark the inflicted person’s forehead and temples. The same marks are said to appear on the *buda*, wherever she or he might be situated.

The discourse on *buda* is explained by Tigrayans themselves to be primarily concerned with jealousy and envy. It is a discourse forcing people to keep material gain and eventual happiness away from the public gaze. Hence the discourse can be interpreted as concerned with maintaining equality in a community, that no one gets more power, material or otherwise, than the others, that none are perceived as better than the others, attempting to take those down who stick their necks out too much. Thus it resembles in my opinion, what we in Norway would call the ‘law of Jante’.¹² Saba tells me that if my husband’s former girl-friend was a *buda*, or if she had had the money to pay one, I would certainly have been dead by now, because of the heavy jealousy she felt towards me.

Witchcraft explanations

“I do not believe in *buda*,” Kidane¹³ says in answer to my question. But still he says he cannot know for sure if the *buda* exists or not. “I’m only guessing. I haven’t seen it myself,” he says. I ask him if that means he believes it exists after all. He says there are two answers to that question. He sees that people get sick. Because he is influenced by those who talk about it, he tends to think there is *buda*, despite knowing this is not a scientific explanation. Kidane says with a laugh that when he hears people talk about it he feels “*q’urub yfereh’e*, a bit frightened.” However, he thinks that the power of the *buda* is ineffective as long as the victim is not afraid.

Referring to Evans-Pritchard’s influential study of the Azande in Sudan, Max Gluckman (1956) points out the important fact that witchcraft explanations do not exclude empirical explanations about *how* it happened, but is concerned with *why*. Likewise, he interprets accusations about witchcraft as concerned with tensions in tight social relations implicating competition for status, position and scarce resources, and that “[n]atural events and the morality of social relations are, so to speak, involved in one another (Gluckman 1956: 93). Further, Ralph A. Austen suggests that witchcraft is “a discourse equating the acquisition of wealth and power with (1) the consumption of human life (2) links to a more powerful outside world” (Austen

¹² The concept ‘law of Jante’ (Janteloven) was introduced by the Danish author Aksel Sandemose (1933) in his novel *En flyktning krysser sitt spor*.

¹³ Recorded interview 23rd September, 2002. His name is altered.



Talelle and Tsehay are cousins. Their pose shows intimacy. It is common to see male friends walk hand in hand, while husband and wife would refrain from showing any signs of affection in public.

1993: 92). The reason I think the discourse on *buda* is relevant to my discussion, is because it implicitly instructs people to keep a low profile, and to control their self-presentation. If you are perceived as being too proud, and are making what is perceived as too much out of your performance in daily life, it is thought that it might lead to attacks by *buda*. Based on accusations, the *buda* discourse is concerned with how another being can enter and take hold of your body, 'eat' it from within, and thereby threaten your life.

According to Giddens, regularised control of the body is fundamental in maintaining a coherent sense of self-identity: "at the same time the self is also more or less constantly 'on display' to others in terms of its embodiment" (Giddens 1991: 58). His point reminds me of Jeremy Bentham's idea of the Panopticon from 1791, a prison where the prisoners can be observed at all times. Bentham's argument was that not knowing exactly when observation is taking place, the observed will internalise state control mechanisms, "thus the prisoner necessarily surveys and disciplines himself" (Batchen 1999: 190). In the Tigrayan context the discourse on *buda* could be interpreted as having a similar disciplining effect, as well as a levelling function in the local community where being 'seen' can result in death. As such, witchcraft can be interpreted, according to Max Gluckman "as a sanction against anti-social behaviour by supporting the social virtues. Thus the beliefs support the moral order of the community, over and above particular quarrels" (Gluckman 1956: 94). However, functionalist explanations in general implicate a rather mystical connection between individuals' actions, and social reproduction as in tune and occupied with precisely the same project. Instead I suggest that witchcraft might have a whole lot more to do with subjective interests and a zero-sum logic concerning distribution of scarce resources, and as is acknowledged in the Tigrayan context, thus based on envy and jealousy.

As researchers have pointed out, witchcraft and sorcery cannot be interpreted as exclusively traditional practices as it has not succumbed but rather been revitalized, especially in Africa, under the influences of modernity and globalisation. Peter Geschiere even suggests a "'modernity' of witchcraft" (Geschiere 1997: 3) that reveals people's concern with handling the perceived irrationality in the accumulation of power and wealth on a contemporary life-scene; addressing the tension between "desire and (im)possibility" (Comaroff et al. 1993: xxx). I do acknowledge the human creativity at work in making sense of one's life-world. I likewise appreciate the following attempt by Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders (2001) to de-exoticise the phenomenon of witchcraft and other occult forces:

"Witchcraft and the occult in Africa are a set of discourses on morality, sociality and humanity; on human frailty. Far from being a set of irrational beliefs, they are a form of historical consciousness, a sort of social diagnostics. In this sense, they strongly resemble other forms of social, economic and political diagnostics, originating in the academy and without, that try to explain why the world is the way it is, why it is changing and moving in a particular manner, at the moment. These theories, most of them originating in the social sciences, are equally concerned with value and



growth, with consumption and power, and with the impact of the world on the lives of individuals and communities: in short, with the major concerns of witchcraft" (Moore et al. 2001: 20).

However, what the discourse on *buda* undoubtedly establishes in social interaction in Tigray is a fear of being attacked, and thus the perceived need to subdue self-presentation. Jacques Mercier says in *Art that heals*: "In a general way in Ethiopian society, the eye represents beauty; it is also powerful, even death-dealing" (Mercier 1997: 94). Interestingly, seen from the point of view of the *buda*, witch, or *debtera*, sorcerer, the latter mentioned in chapter 2, these discourses implicitly acknowledge human agency, but an agency that has gone astray, threatening other individual actors.

Abeba's story; a story about violence and *sheyt'an*, Satan

Abeba¹⁴ (40), has lived fifteen years abroad in Sudan and the Middle-East before she returned to Tigray as a wealthy woman by local standards. Her story clearly shows how local discourse, relating to an understanding of self, is an integral part of personal experiences, as well as suggesting causal explanations for life-threatening events.

"I am from a rural village. There I'm born. There I grew up herding my family's cattle and goats," Abeba starts her story. "When my parents divorced it was a big problem for my mother. Then she married again, but my mother's new husband started beating her. I ran away, came back; ran away again. In the end I went to *amoy*, my father's sister, in May Tsebri. I was between thirteen or fifteen years of age when my aunt married me off. My menstruation had not started yet." Abeba's husband had kept her like a prisoner; she was not allowed to go outside the compound, and after two years she ran away. "When my mother heard that I was beaten by my present husband, she came to see me. My destiny is that men beat me. I want to live with one man; but it is not my fate to get a proper husband," she says. When I met Abeba, a day or two after she was severely beaten, I asked her what had happened. She told me that she had run into a door. Her face was blue and swollen. I asked her: "did you quarrel¹⁵ with your husband?" She looked away and answered quietly, "yes". The next day she came by again, sat down in my doorway and started telling me what happened. I knew she did not think of me as a researcher at the time so one week later I asked her to retell the story, including her life-story, and I asked her permission to record it and use it in my research. She agreed without hesitation, the main difference between the two versions was her decision to stay on with her husband. When she told me the story the first time, she was determined to break it off. Abeba has lived

¹⁴ Recorded interview 6th November 2002. Her name is altered.

¹⁵ *Mebais* is the word usually used in *Tigrinya* to signify clashes between people, also between husband and wife, and can be translated with both 'to quarrel' and 'to fight'. The word itself does not differentiate the uneven gendered power relation implicit in domestic violence. A common question when it is known that a woman has been beaten by her husband is, "what did she do?" implicitly signalling she might as well deserve it.



Far left: Abrahaley is a *milisha*, and assigned to fend off dangers in his village. Goytom and Gidey are posing with guns borrowed for the occasion; if you look closely you will see that Gidey is posing with Abrahaley's weapon as does Teklay (far right).

Next pages, from left: Teklay holds the *wantch'a*, made from a calabash for *sewa*, the local millet beer. He is posing with his brother Mebrahtom (left) at his eldest son's wedding. The groom, Gweesh, is dressed up in a white hat and *kuta*, the traditional white shawl, and poses with his father and his closest friends. His father Mebrahtom was a *milisha* during the revolution, and chooses to pose with his *kalashen* and a grenade. When I ask how old the bride is, he answers that she is eighteen, which is the legal age for marrying off a girl. I say I doubt it, whereupon he turns to his friends and says: "she knows." February 2001.

almost two years in Tigray after she returned from the Middle-East, "but there is no rest here," she says. "If God helps me I will stay, if he does not I will go on somewhere. This place is not good for me. My body was nice when I came here, now I'm thin, *q'etin*, and black, *ts'elim*. My strength has left me. When I was hit again this last time, I lost so much blood. My head has become like a stone."

Abeba starts to tell what happened: "it was in the morning, not in the evening; 5 o'clock in the morning. I wanted to go to the new church. I asked him [my husband] to come with me. He answered me, 'I'm not going, my *resa*, [spirit after death] will go.' Then he went to the toilet. When he came back he started hitting me. Then he hit me again. I asked him to leave it, to behave. Again he hit me, I fell. He went to get his *kalashen*; he wanted to kill me. I begged him again to leave it. Please stop it, I begged him. From 5 o'clock to 7.30 I begged him to stop. He had taken a grenade and started to undo it. He had torn my dress. I had lost a lot of blood; I was shivering cold." Eventually one of the lodgers woke up, and came to her assistance. He alerted the police and they took her husband to the police station. "I told them I would come later when I had washed off the blood. I drank coffee; I locked up the house and went out."

Then Abeba continues: "the police came and fetched his *t'ebenja*, his weapons. On Wednesday, when you came back, I opened the house again, made coffee. Two days and two nights it had been closed. He was released and came back to ask forgiveness. He said it was not my fault he hit me, and that I saved his life. '*Bedileye, bedileye*, forgive me, forgive me', he said. He did not say any more. There was no insulting, no other talking. He came to see television, no insulting, no talking. He came and went the following week. Now it is ten days since he hit me." To explain why he hit her, she says: "I am sure it was Satan who took hold of him, *sheyt'an hizuwu*. There had not been anything bad in advance; no bad talking, no quarrelling or other problems that would make him do so. 'How can they start quarrelling in the morning,' people wondered. There was no previous problem; Satan had come." She had told me before she had not been afraid, now she confirms: "I was not afraid; *sheyt'an* had taken hold of me too." Her husband had told her that if she screamed, and people came, he would kill them all. "God was looking after us, I believe. To keep quiet was the best thing, I think. If people came he threatened to shoot them down. 'Why did you not cry out?' people asked me. Blood kept running from my head, my nose all that time, two and a half hour." Abeba, and other Tigrayan women with her, made me aware that it is considered the best thing not to resist violence if you cannot escape, and keep quiet.

To explain how *sheyt'an* works, Abeba continues to tell me about how she got sick the year before. "One night I heard this knocking on my door, '*men ikha, men ikha*, who is it, who is it,' I asked. Two or three times it happened. It was in the middle of the night. I was afraid the knocking would wake up my mother, who was there with me. In the end I opened, but there were no one there. That same night I got sick. I was sick for two months. My head was like fire. It was not malaria, the test was negative." She is sure *sheyt'an* inflicted her with illness the



moment she opened the door. Abeba is around forty years old and has no children. She has had a couple of miscarriages. People give her a hard time about her barrenness. She knows very well her time for becoming a mother is running out.

Women's life-stories helped me to catch sight of flexible and mobile actors. Abeba is both willing and capable of moving on, to try out new possibilities if things do not work out. She is also aware that her husband's beating her could have been caused by envy or jealousy, possibly generated by her husband's acquaintances mocking him about the fact that she is richer than he. Such 'bad' feelings are seen as creating a possibility for evil spirits to enter a body and take hold of the person. I ask her if she has filed a charge against him. "For what purpose?" she asks. As long as no one died she sees no purpose in doing so. She says it will only give people a lot to talk about. I ask her if they will continue together. "We will see. We will try. Many elders, *shemagele* came to try to reconcile us. How could I ask them to go away? They asked me to try, since he had asked forgiveness. If we will go on or break up, God will know." She says she is not afraid he will hit her again. "If he does, I will find another way."

On violence in the Ethiopian context Bilen Gisaw says: "society's attitude in Ethiopia is not at all hostile to domestic violence. On the contrary, it is condoned (...) trivialized, rationalized and accepted as something that is bound to take place in the normal course of life" (Bilen 2002: 36-7).¹⁶ Further, Henrietta Moore explains gender-based violence as "the consequence of a crisis in representation, both individual and social. The inability to maintain the fantasy of power triggers a crisis in the fantasy of identity, and violence is a means of resolving this crisis because it acts to reconfirm the nature of a masculinity otherwise denied" (Moore 1994: 69). Seen from a gendered point of view, Abeba surely challenges her husband's position through her economic status. That it was publicly known and commented on might therefore be perceived by Ababa's husband as something he must act upon, to restore his reputation as well as self-image. However, by putting the blame on *sheyt'an* for having made him beat her up, Abeba opens up a possibility for reconciliation with her husband, and thus restore their relationship. In Rahwa's case below however, the possession threatens to undermine her determination for an education.

Pursuing an education, being possessed

"*Buda allo do?* Is there *buda*?" I ask Rahwa. "Yes there is; a lot of them," she says. "Who are they?" Rahwa knows who they are. She tells me that if a girl has gold, a new dress and nice shoes, she might risk that *buda* takes hold of her because of somebody's jealousy. She lowers her voice. She is tired of all the jealousy and insults in the local community. "*Ane suqh' ile*, I keep

¹⁶ See also Habtamu Wondimu, Hirut Terefe, Yusuf Omer Abdi, *Gender and Cross Cultural Dynamics in Ethiopia. A Study of Eleven Ethnic Groups*. Addis Ababa University: Unpublished, Library, Center for Research Training and Information on Women in Development. Institute of Development Research, 1997.



quiet". I ask her if that means she does not share her heart with anybody? "I have one good friend; we trust each other. We can talk," Rahwa says.

Then I ask her, are you afraid that *buda* will take hold of you? "No, I am not afraid. My *kokhob*, star/destiny is strong," she tells me; "*buda* will not take hold of me, I was told by a traditional healer, *felat'i*." Then she continues: "but *buda-zar* has taken hold of me." The *buda-zar* resembles the *buda*, when it takes hold of somebody, but is a spirit from *berekha*, the 'wilderness'. "It might take hold of you if you walk alone between villages in the afternoon or in the evening. If it has, you will start to cry heavily. The *buda-zar* is strong," she assures me, and starts showing me how it takes hold of her breath, and starts swinging her head and body from side to side. "It is similar to *sheyt'an*, it can kill people. *Buda-zar* is stronger than the *buda*. *Buda* is easy."

The first time she was taken hold of was after a quarrel within the family. "It started then. It was February, less than a year ago. When it happened I was very afraid. I cried and cried as if somebody had died. My mother told me it must be *nay berekha h'emam*, an illness from the 'wilderness'. ... It came suddenly. It wasn't me. ... At first it was like it clenched me from behind. Now it is inside my body. ... Maybe I will get well again, maybe not." There is always the danger that the spirit will take over completely; and eventually kill the person. "If I live a good life, it will stay calm," she tells me. At that time however, there was much tension in her life, between her desire for an education and the resulting stigma of being a prostitute inflicted on her by the local community simply because she attended school. At the same time her body was transforming into womanhood all by itself; it seemed as though the only way she could attain her goal was by repressing her sexuality.

"Yesterday I was sick again, Rahwa continues. "Monday I will go to a holy spring, *may ts'olet*. I have got permission from school to stay away for a week. My heart is flickering; my mind is troubled. The *zar* is in my body." The *felat'i* had given her *ketab*, amulets, and told her to go and wash in a holy spring. "There is a place nearby, I will go there and stay there for seven days; if it does not work I will stay for another seven days. I will wash my body every morning. It would have been better to go to Adwa though," she says, "to wash in holy water there, but I have not got the money to travel that far. When I have paid my house rent and my food, there is no money left." When Rahwa had been one week at the holy spring, she came to visit me. She told me she felt better. After a few days she became sick again. The other students helped her home. Rahwa is afraid she will not manage to continue school. She cannot concentrate. "When I am at school, I am tired; my mind is not at rest." She says she does not have the money to buy a new dress to wear to calm down the *buda-zar*. The other students helped her with the forty-one birr for the new school uniform. Instead, Rahwa bought a new colourful necklace, and a new saucer for the coffee ceremony to try to pacify the *buda-zar*.

Sorcery, witchcraft and spirit possession constitute a constant challenge to bodily integrity and hence individual autonomy. In addition to God's will, this fact would influence the perceived potential for individual agency. The discourses on the *debtera* and *buda* also involve

individual actors in continuous identity management to avert risk relating to jealousy and envy. Thus resilience must be understood to be an important cultural strategy for both men and women. In the next chapter I will therefore continue to identify social spaces where resilience is required in daily life situations. I will return to Fredrik Barth's (2002) concept 'traditions of knowledge' to see how actors negotiate different discourses to be able to strategise. I will also identify spaces where flexibility and mobility are a precondition, and thus return to a gendered actor's positioning in social interaction and within social relations.

Chapter 6

POSITIONING A GENDERED ACTOR

Due to its somehow negative evolutionary connotations I have avoided heaping together *buda* and *debtera*, *sheyt'an* and *buda-zar* as traditional 'beliefs'. Instead I find it more fruitful to call them discourses; constituting the world and the forces within it, according to causality specific to different 'traditions of knowledge'. Dividing knowledge into three parts, 'substantive corpus', 'communicative medium' and 'social organisation', Barth (2002) suggests that, "[t]heir mutual determination takes place at those specific moments when a particular item of substantive knowledge is cast in a communicative medium and applied in action by an actor positioned in a particular social organization" (Barth 2002: 3). This analytic perspective implies actors negotiating knowledge in different situations and circumstances; but equally important, understands knowledge itself as a flexible matter. It is with these points in mind I will discuss individual actor's handling of knowledge as an on-going strategic process.

When I talked with Saba¹ again about her son's illness, she added to her previous version. The first one was that the doctor did not find anything wrong, and that she had bought *buda*-medicine to cure him. Now she says that although her son had had an injection at the hospital to lower his fever, she considered the illness might be caused by the *debtera*. Therefore she called on a *debtera* to read from the Book to heal her son; it might even have been the same *debtera* that had caused his illness, Saba reflects, but she does not know. The *debtera* said it was an illness from a *debtera*. "Anyway my son recovered," Saba says.

If I put the pieces of her story together they cover the main perceived causes for illness in the area, as acknowledged by biomedicine, and as caused by evil, in this case through the works of the *debtera* and *buda*. Harald Aspen (1994) chooses to relate this coexistence of different knowledge systems as constituting a 'Knowledge Buffet', that instead of one particular system gaining hegemony, enables people to "make use of wildly differing and mutually inconsistent knowledge about the world and the powers and agents in it, depending on the situation and problem they want to solve" (Aspen 1994: 334). Concerning illness, I asked people during the interviews what cures they would prefer. Their choice of cure would be related to what kind of illness, *behabesha h'emam* or *befelt'et h'emam*, a traditional illness or one known by science. While the first group would include more indefinable diseases caused by spirits and handled by traditional healers or the church, the latter would be illnesses such as malaria, TB, etc, and could be handled either by traditional healers, the church or practitioners of biomedicine, or all of them. One of the many occasions I arrived at a private clinic in Shire/Endaselassie, with

¹ Recorded interview 7th November, 2002. Her name is altered.

The local priest, *q'eshi* Kidanemariyam, also a peasant, is helping Medhin, a widow and head of household, to plough. When passing me he stops the oxen to make sure I get what he considers a 'good' picture.

yet another amoeba-infection, one of the office staff suggested I try washing in *may ts'olet*, a holy spring, to prevent another infection. My impression is that even if these traditions of knowledge might seem, according to Aspen, as 'mutually inconsistent', it certainly does not prevent them from being considered and applied on equal terms. And likewise, that biomedicine as such has not gained a hegemonic position, but exists alongside the other systems as one possible alternative. However, my point is that the coexistence of different traditions of knowledge opens up for potential flexibility in individual actors' attempts to make their life-world not only understandable, but manageable. And that handling knowledge is one aspect of the actors' resilient positioning in-between local discourse, practical social relationships and practice.

Why Lemlem² died

Risk is known to all people in all cultures; what would be perceived as risky varies, as does the ranking of possible risks. According to Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1982) any form of society would select the way its environments are perceived according to prevailing traditions of knowledge, thereby influencing the selection of dangers worth attention.³

Natural sciences in the Enlightenment project were seen as a means to achieve control over nature, and implicitly to reduce risks to mankind. If the causes were known the dangers could potentially be prevented, or at least cured. The multitude of possible explanations offered by modern science and the lack of one static truth, seem to have made this an unattainable goal. But even if the risks might differ from one society to another, as do causal explanations, perceived risks may have a similar impact on people realising their own vulnerability. The fear of *buda* attacks in a Tigrayan village might be felt as life-threatening and difficult to control, just as my own fear that cancer might take hold of my body. Below I will focus on causation and its social implications, including distribution of responsibility and moral blame, as a means to make sense of Tigrayans' life-situation.

I happened to be present when Lemlem (30) died. She had given birth five months earlier, but had not recovered and was slowly getting thinner and thinner. The TB medicine she took was not of any help to her. By the time she died she was nothing but skin and bones, her big brown eyes seemed even larger than before. Lemlem was not married. Her lover was already married, but she got pregnant nevertheless. When I ask a close friend of hers about the cause of her death, I begin by suggesting she died of a broken heart, since her lover had stopped seeing her when she got sick. Her friend tells me that three days after Lemlem had given birth to a healthy daughter she had got out of bed and started washing her clothes. A woman is supposed to stay inside and rest at least the first twelve days after giving birth, because of her

² Her name is altered.

³ From this point of view the relatively new 'alien' threat of HIV/Aids might therefore not necessarily be ranked on top, as it "becomes just another risk" (Karim & Frohlich 2000: 78) to the individual, as invisible, uncontrollable and death bringing as other potential threats.



vulnerability to alien attacks after childbirth. Washing her clothes Lemlem had felt a sting in her body, and fell ill at that very moment. “God does not like that kind of action from a woman who has given birth. That is why she got sick; that is why she died,” her friend tells me. In my mind is an etched image of the empty bed as her body was taken to the local church to be buried, just a few hours after her death. Left on the floor under the bed in an untidy bundle is her holy scroll, about ten centimetres wide and the length resembling her height, with Orthodox Christian writings and drawings meant to cure her.

Focusing on causality I find Tola Olu Pearce (2000) instructive when she states: “If one turns to the indigenous perspective on health, one sees that well-being was originally perceived in moral and political terms. Health is the end product or consequence of social relations” (Pearce 2000: 4). She points out that indigenous explanations for illness and death has always been multi-causal, but at its core the concern was relationships and interaction, both human and non-human. “Much of this perspective came into conflict with biomedicine, because much of it dealt with religious beliefs, the supernatural, and spirits. Even with these entities, the focus was on relationships” (Pearce 2000: 5). I think this focus on relationships is instructive also in the Tigrayan context to understand the interdependence, and at the same time, the vulnerability of individual actors within social relations in a situation of seemingly uncontrollable living conditions. From this point of view Lemlem died because she had not behaved properly in relation to an almighty God, and not because of a scientifically recognisable cause, even if this cause was identified.

Douglas and Wildavsky further suggest that “[a]ttribution of responsibility for natural disasters is a normal strategy for protecting a particular set of values belonging to a particular way of life” (Douglas et al. 1982: 8). The discourses on *buda* and *debtera*, *sheytan* and *buda-zar* offer causal explanations of disease as well as a possibility to manage conflict in interpersonal relations that place the blame, partly or entirely, outside the relationship itself. As in Abeba’s case in chapter 5, by putting the blame on *sheyt’an* for possessing her husband when he beat her up, she freed him from the responsibility of his own actions, thus enabling their process of reconciliation. However, the discourses on possession also suggest that the individual should realise her vulnerability and dependency, and not venture too far off on her own, as Rahwa might be understood to have done.

Explaining possession

Although my main observations has not been with possession practice, the local discourse on possession, as revealed to me through life-stories and narrated experiences, clearly has consequences for the individual actor. The discourse is implicitly dealing with bodily integrity and thus individual autonomy, which must be understood to be ambiguous in the Tigrayan context. However, before I proceed I will summarise a few analytic perspectives on possession practices to contrast it with my own analytic perspective.



The priests are always invited to bless social events. Here *q'eshi* Kidanemariam is posing at the birthday party for Mengistu's youngest son.

Right: The priest blesses the child and breaks the bread against the child's back. If the bread breaks easily, it means the child is strong. Addisalem (1), meaning 'new world', is a peace child, conceived when his father Mengistu (right), returned home from the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998-2000).

Far right: Soldiers returning home from the front often make framed collections of photographs like the one Mengistu poses with. The golden frames contain photographs that the soldiers brought to the field of their loved ones, as well as new photographs taken while they were away. Mengistu's frame shows a picture of himself in uniform, his ID and one photograph of his daughter. October 2002.

Most interpretations of possession seem to be concerned with its collective significance and counter-hegemonic character, and as a form of resistance to subordination. This analytic perspective is applied in the case of young female Malaysian factory workers in trans-national companies; possession being interpreted as a way of expressing their resistance under capitalist production and cultural constraints (Ong 1987). Michael Lambek (1988) claims, dealing with possession in Mayotte, an island in the Comoro Archipelago, that it provides a "means for women to exercise their general moral concern", likewise that it provides them with, "greater scope and authority in activities which they have always taken an interest: articulating social relations, maintaining peace and order within their families, and looking after reproduction in both the social and biological senses" (Lambek 1988: 725). Janice Boddy (1989) suggests, relating to the *zar*-cult in Northern Sudan, that "[p]ossession is as much a cultural aesthetic: a means to perceive new and rewarding or possibly disturbing significances in what was accepted as given, as it is therapy: a means to correct faulty perceptions, to cure" (Boddy 1989: 353). Hence, possession in the above examples is predominantly interpreted as creating space for negotiations, where this possibility is perceived as socially constrained without challenging the social order itself. These analytic perspectives do have their relevance in the Tigrayan context as well.

However, instead of pursuing an analytic perspective that reinforces the idea that the African self is merely defined by its relational embedding, Ellen Corin (1998) defines the Zebola idiom of spirit possession in Zaire, and its ritual enactment as an important means in a process of individuation. She claims that individuation must be seen as structurally inscribed in certain settings or circumstances also in African traditional society, and thus counters the idiom of individuation as a mere modern phenomenon. Her position is that,

"spirit possession releases and articulates a potential for individuation; at the same time, spirit possession redefines the foundations of the relationship with the cultural order and, more generally, creates a new dialectic at the individual as well as at the collective level" (Corin 1998: 89).

Corin's focus on individuation is instructive for my discussion on possession and its implications for the individual actor. However, I think it is important to emphasise a distinction between possession practice and discourse, since my focus has been on the latter. The Tigrayan discourses on possession addresses the vulnerability of individual actors both within and outside the community; and thus implicitly, relate to individuality as their point of departure.

That it is possible to be possessed by different spirits from *berekha*, is something people to different degrees seem to be concerned with. Possession is implicitly acknowledged as a threat also by the Orthodox Church, by the very fact that protection and cures are offered by this institution. Mostly it is women who get possessed by the *zar* or the *q'olle*, a similar spirit that might be aroused by the beating of a drum; however men is also known to be possessed by spirits. Then there are the threats from *sheyt'an*, which can take over any person regardless of



sex, and cause illness and death. Michele⁴ (35), who as a teenager learnt with the priests says that “if people turn mad, they say that *sheyt’an* took hold of them”. He explains that to cure someone who has been taken hold of by *sheyt’an*, *may degam* would be used, water that is blessed by a priest reading from the Book. The water will be splashed onto the sick person or she will wash in it for the next seven days. He says some get well; some do not. “Are you afraid of *sheyt’an*?” I ask. “Ewe, yes,” he answers. “*Kemutat allo*. Their kinds exist. They make people mad or they kill people. It is true. They are called *jinni*.” “Where are they?” I ask. “*Ab berekha*, in the ‘wilderness’, but they can be found also in the smaller towns; if it is dark or the sun is at its peak and there are no other people around, ‘they can find you’, people say, in the middle of the day at around noon or at night. Between noon and 2 p.m. people would not wander around alone.” He explains that *sheyt’an* and *jinni* are the same, that they have many names like *debas* and *ganien*. He continues that it is also said there are spirits watching the graves. “They are dangerous spirits. But if you read from the Book you will be all right.” He asks if I want to hear, and starts saying a long prayer in Geez. He assures me that all people have four spirits, *melaekheti*, who guard them, two in the daytime and two at night. I came to learn though that people would add to their protection and put a piece of metal, usually a knife, under their pillow if sleeping alone, to prevent malicious spirits attacking during sleep.

The discourse on possession, concerning both *buda-zar* and *sheyt’an*, relate to the perceived dangers connected to venturing off on your own, away from the protection of the community. This point can be interpreted in more than a spatial sense; as with Rahwa, who has taken on the project of obtaining an education, choosing a life-trajectory contrary to her parents wish for traditional marriage. However, that these dangerous spaces most often are defined as *berekha*, the arid unpopulated spaces in their environment, might signal that these spaces are culturally unruly. That these same spaces were the base areas for *shiftas*, outlaws, as well as the Tigrayan revolution, make them uncontrolled spaces with the potential for transformation. Thus the moral code implicit in the possession discourses could be interpreted as a way of keeping the individual actors in line with the others.

Spirits and revolutionary influences

To summarise my interpretation of the Tigrayan possession discourses: the discourse on *buda* is concerned with the vulnerability of individuals within a relational context when perceived as sticking ones neck out too much, and thus the need to subdue self-presentation. The discourses on *buda-zar* and *sheyt’an* could be understood as identifying risks to the individual outside of a relational context; when alone. According to Janice Boddy: “possession actively mediates the historical dialectic of acquiescence and resistance, of determined social persons and self-determining actors” (Boddy 1989: 347), and as such could be interpreted as a vibrant expression

⁴ Recorded interview 6th November 2002. His name is altered.



Aboy Asfaha, an elder in his village, supervises the building of the bonfire 6 o'clock in the morning at the Mesq'el celebration at the local church, celebrating the recovery of the true Cross, 27th September (Ethiopian Calendar, Mesq'ereṃ 17th), while the chairman of the village, Abrahaley, watches. The fire will be lit by a priest at the end of the ceremony.

of tension and conflicting interests in the relation between the self and society. I have already mentioned in chapter 1 that there is a contradiction between the Ethiopian government and local discourse in the case of possession. Following Jenny Hammond,

“[t]he TPLF worked hard to discourage superstitious beliefs and practices in the countryside, where these were powerful. Although they have no doubt diminished with increasing development of economy and education they are unlikely to have been eliminated” (Hammond 1999: 441).

There is no doubt that the different discourses on possession persist. However, even if these discourses might be opposed to Tigrayan revolutionary doctrine, there seems to be no major contradictions in relation to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as these non-Christian elements are not presented as opposed to Christianity, but rather incorporated within its general framework (Aspen 1994). Likewise Jacques Mercier states: “[Orthodox] Christian discourse and the discourse on *Zar* are mutually reinforcing on the question of possession. If Christianity is a religion of transcendence, it still allows that spirits, and even the holiest of these, may dwell in a human body” (Mercier 1997: 106). As mentioned in chapter 5, *aboy* Tadesse had passed his healing knowledge about *buda* and *buda-zar* to his son who is a priest. The Orthodox Church relates to possession as a relevant possibility, and offers protection by providing *ts'ebel* or *may degam*, holy powdered matter or blessed water, as well as having defined the holy springs where it is possible to wash and recover. And not least, the Orthodox Church instructs people how to live to secure their relations to an Almighty God. However, *aboy* Haddish⁵ tells me, when I show him the little bundle of *ts'ebel* in my pocket: “you should take care if you wear the *ts'ebel*, you cannot sleep with your husband then.” I was told that the power of the *ts'ebel* could turn against me if I did not follow the Orthodox Christian rules, and that what was meant to protect me would then harm me. As Aspen (1994) notes, rather than being challenged by different traditions of knowledge the hegemony of the Orthodox Church seems to be reinforced. But nevertheless, that the “private quality of the spirit beliefs perpetuates the innovative and creative aspects, because there is no standard and overall authority, as in the church, that censors ideas, doctrines, rituals and symbols” (Aspen 1994: 343). However, I have wondered why there seems to be more women than men venturing to church in the morning on the different saints' days. Advantaged women, especially those with wealth and beauty, are believed to be vulnerable to *buda* attacks (H. Pankhurst 1992). However, women's more often marginalised economic position makes appeal to God and his will a relevant strategy. A woman is likewise thought to be especially vulnerable to spirit attacks during her childbearing periods, and shortly afterwards, as Lemlem fatally experienced. Hence the uncontrollability of the spirit world could be understood as more threatening for women than for men, and thus requiring divine protection. However, that social relations are perceived as fragile, seems to be a fact for both men and women.

⁵ Recorded interview 11th October, 2002. His name is altered.

While the others are occupied with building the bonfire, *aboy* Mebrahtom uses the occasion to be photographed.

Next pages: *Haleq'a* Gebrehawerya and *Haleq'a* Gebre are beating the drums during the ceremony just outside the church compound. At the *Mesq'el* celebration the clergy is wearing their finest church costumes. While I am afraid to disturb the ceremony by photographing, *q'eshi* Kidanemariam urges me forward into a better position to take pictures.



Managing fragile social relationships

There is a voiced emphasis on social relations in the Tigrayan context, and I was often invited to enjoy what would be called 'Ethiopian culture' at different social gatherings and celebrations. As I often brought my camera and took pictures, it resulted in more invitations and the explicit wish that I photographed.

One such social occasion is the *mah'eber*. Orthodox Christianity includes both angels and saints, and the most important of these are allotted one day a month for worship, adding up to over half the days of the month. These are days, in addition to Saturdays and Sundays, when you are not supposed to work; a rule strictly followed by the peasants and handcrafters, but not by government institutions and within commerce. This means that if there has been a nice rain during the night, making the soil perfect for ploughing, the farmer would refrain from working if it is *beal*, a saint's day, for fear of later punishment, for example crop failure. Instead he would be organised in a group of another eleven households, to accommodate the rotation of *mah'eber* on a particular saint's day to celebrate, among others, either Michael, Georgis, Selassie, Medhinalem (Jesus) or Mariyam (Saint Mary)⁶. Friends, neighbours and family will be invited, and in turn are invited to other saints' days. If there is the material means to do so, six households would rotate the accommodation of the *mah'eber* twice a year. People would be invited to join, to eat, to drink, *tets'awet*, 'play', having a nice and sociable time; to 'play' being imperative.

Even when the event is a *teskar*, a memorial gathering, to commemorate a deceased relative, the sorrow is under-communicated after the church ceremony in the morning. Then it is time to drink and eat and 'play'. This can be exemplified by an episode at a *teskar*, which was arranged for a woman who had died four years earlier abroad. One of her sons, who came back to his childhood village for the first time in many years, burst into tears over the impact of the ongoing event and the reunion with his family. He was quickly taken care of by a woman and brought into one of the houses, away from peoples' gaze. Men crying are seen as woman-like. However, concerning both men and women, crying in public is acceptable only at funerals, and even then, those present would check that the emotional expression is kept to an acceptable limit. Those family members closest to the deceased, for example a daughter or a sister, a husband or a son would be held in a firm grip from behind when 'singing-crying' their sorrow.

If you want to keep up a particular relation it is important to participate. And if you could not attend someone's *meqh'aber*, funeral, you would probably consider it worthwhile paying the family a visit as soon as possible afterwards. The two women who came to visit a household in a rural village while I was there, holding their *kuta*, thick white shawls over their mouths, a way of communicating their errand, were immediately shown into one of the huts. The old woman follows them, and, well inside, they all start 'singing-crying'. I am sitting outside in the *das*, the temporarily built hut of branches providing ventilation as well as shade

⁶ Specific women's *mah'eber* would usually be devoted to Mariyam, Saint Mary.



from the sun, with the old woman's husband; her daughter-in-law continues her work making *injerra* in the kitchen-hut. The 'singing-crying' continues for about ten minutes. When the old woman comes out she has still got tears on her cheeks, but starts to move the *fernello*, coal stove, inside the hut to make coffee. I ask her who has died. She says her brother's son one week ago; the women have come to bring their condolences and take part in her mourning. Then she invites me inside the hut where the women are now washing their faces and feet, pouring water from an old tin. At first there is a little talk about the deceased, but there is no more 'singing-crying' and outburst of feelings; the time and space for emotionally voicing their grief seems to have passed.

Likewise, when I came to see Lemlem's mother and sister, a week after she had died, during the period of *h'azen*, mourning, the house is full of women chatting. Her mother is sitting on a blanket on the floor; both her face and her posture show her pain of losing a daughter. The women take turns trying to cheer her up, pointing to God's will in these matters. Some of the women sit quietly, others laugh about some past funny incident. No one cries. The women bring food, coffee or sugar. Some bring money to help the family out. They will also remind the mourning family that it is time to start forgetting.

These social events all have a double function; they are meant to secure both worldly and spiritual relations. As for the *teskar*, it is meant to secure the entrance of the deceased to Heaven, preventing the *resa*, your spirit after death, from becoming a restless soul disturbing the living. This relational aspect would be imperative in all the institutionalised social gatherings conducted by Orthodox Christians. Representatives from the local church would be present at these gatherings to bless the event and the household. These events are of abundance and generosity; you are asked to eat long after you are satisfied, and your *wanch'a*, the container for *sewa*, is filled up till it flows over long before you have managed to finish the last round. If you eat and drink what is seen as too little, it is taken as an offence, likewise if you do not turn up when you happen to be invited. As Fredrik Barth states in his study of Swat Pathans, "vis-à-vis one's friends and relatives, the ceremonies offer an occasion for the expression of friendly feelings, disapproval or enmity in terms of one's presence or absence" (Barth [1959] 1965: 35). In my experience his point is applicable in the Tigrayan context as well.

The desire for sociability opens up for a hospitality that is not only a norm, but a joy. However, implicit in this imperative joyfulness is the avoidance of any emotional expression that cannot be incorporated into the cultural understanding of *tets'awet*, 'play'. At a Christening party a woman, who suddenly remembered a deceased girl whom she had considered her daughter, was immediately asked to stop or leave as tears filled her eyes. Likewise, if you happen to sit around in a gloomy mood, you will be asked to cheer up, and 'play'. People would answer "*ishi*, OK", even if they choose not to join in. I was mocked for the length of my stay for my straightforwardness, having answered, "*aydellen*, I don't want to," on an occasion where people tried to make me forget my inner turmoil. The right answer would have been *ishi*, and



then keep quiet, or take the hint and leave to sulk on my own. *H'azen*, sorrow, should be dealt with in the spaces created culturally for communal mourning, otherwise alone. To be angry sometimes, seemed not to be a big deal; that I happened to cry in the 'wrong' situations was a bigger problem. I later came to understand that people were afraid that crying itself would attract death.

Tension and conflicting interests

That social relations implicate conflicting interests, and that quarrels can take a violent turn, are neither uncommon. The last couple of weeks I stayed in the market town shooting erupted twice in *sewabéts*, the local beer-houses, in my neighbourhood. Likewise, stories were circulated about hard clashes between husbands and wives. "Afterwards they reconcile," Abeba⁷ says. "It is custom, to quarrel, to reconcile, *h'addar*⁸, married life continues." There was also a publicly known case during my fieldwork that a husband had hurt his wife by burning her genitals with a glowing stick. He got sixteen months imprisonment, the same sentence that was given to a man who had delivered a blow with his fist to a fellow farmer.

I had been told, "*Habesha* are jealous people." I cannot tell if they are more jealous than people elsewhere. However, what I can say is that people acknowledge the emotion, and the possible uncontrollable actions that it might result in, as something to take care of, as the following short story exemplifies. There had been a burial in the morning in a rural village. Since I did not know the woman, I asked some women who were related to her, what she died of. They said she was sick. I asked what kind of sickness? They said they did not know. One woman said she died of TB, but another woman protested and said it was not TB. It was not malaria either. I asked if it was *behabesha h'emam* or *befelt'et h'emam*, a traditional illness or one known by science. They said it was a traditional illness and concluded that she died of jealousy. They asked if I know jealousy. I said yes. "Take care about jealousy," one of the women says.

Abeba⁹, when asked about how she experienced the social climate in the market town, said: "I have not found a friend in the market town. I do not have anybody to talk with from my heart. You have known me for the last five months; have you seen that I have a friend?" She herself is from a rural village, but has lived many years abroad. "In this place people are very jealous; if I build a house, they are jealous. They do not like that somebody has more than them; that they become workers for those who have more. ... If I tell something to somebody, they will talk with somebody else about it. I do not visit people here. I keep to the house. All are jealous, both men and women. I do not trust people. This place is very, very hard; people are hard, the place is hard. ... But what can I do, *adikha*, *adikha*, your home place is your home

⁷ Recorded interview 6th November 2002. Her name is altered.

⁸ *H'addar* is used to describe that a man and woman are living together. They are considered husband and wife, but may not always be officially married.

⁹ Recorded interview 6th November, 2002. Her name is altered.



Haleq'a Fetwi, holds his pose while keeping his line in the ceremony. After the priest has finished the reading and singing, the demera, bonfire is fired up. The direction the bonfire eventually falls will be interpreted as a sign of the coming year's challenges. If it falls to the north or east, or anywhere in between, which it actually did, it is taken as a good omen, to the west and south signifies trouble. The women pray while facing the church. The men start dancing as the fire burns down. Afterwards everybody sprinkles their bodies with the ash using the yellow flowers, Maryiam Mesq'el, Saint Mary's cross. Mulugeta says I must not forget to sprinkle my shoes as well; laughingly assuring me they will then last for the next ten years. September 2002.

place," Abeba says and continues: "I don't talk secrets to other people; they don't talk secrets to me. I'm afraid someone will poison me, that someone who is jealous of me will put something in my *sewa*, or in my food; it happens in this place, I'm told, when people are jealous." Thus jealousy is perceived as a strong and dangerous feeling. It can be expressed through gossiping and insulting as well as poisoning, like Abeba is afraid of, violence as Kidane above defined as a men's strategy, and through being possessed by the *buda* or hurt through other evil actions initiated by the *debtera*, and thereby risk death. According to Aspen's (1994) research among the Amharas of Mafud in northern Shoa, in Ethiopia, "the theme of jealousy and envy is a constant threat to peoples' peace and well-being, and very often it looms in the background of other cases of health problems, conflicts, etc" (Aspen 1994: 301). It is thereby a reason to play your 'cards' with care, not to arouse it.

Although social relations are perceived as important for both protection and economic security, relations are nevertheless understood to be fragile; establishing true friendship could be a risk in itself. Kidane¹⁰ says it is built up slowly and rests on a premise of mutual trust and discretion. This means that what they talk about together is not shared with others; such a break of trust would undermine the relationship. A characteristic of a precious friendship is thereby the ability to keep quiet. Kidane admits he even might conduct tests to see if people can be trusted; checking via other people if information provided in an atmosphere of trust starts to circulate. He thinks the high unemployment is contributing to an increase in gossip in the market town: "people have nothing else to do, nothing else to talk about, they are jealous of people who seem to have some success," like himself, a self-made handy-man tending to technical tasks in the market town.

In any case, social relationships are dependent on reassurance and presence. If a tie is established and one of the parties fails to keep it up, like myself in relation to one long-time acquaintance in the market town, it will be interpreted as a withdrawal. Likewise, how many relationships I manage to keep up is dependent on how much time I invest in actually doing so, how often I come to drink coffee for instance, and if I can be reckoned on as someone who will help out in a difficult situation, economically or otherwise. In this relational climate, what you say to whom in which situation influences your social positioning as well as your economic survival. To focus on individuals' relational anchoring is not to say that relations are permanent or can be taken for granted. The mutual influence that people have on each other is a process in progress. Information or gossip, as 'symbolic capital' or cards, can be put to use in social interaction for a certain gain in ever changing situations. However, if I have internalised anything during my fieldwork, it must be to hold my 'cards' close to my chest. I found myself saying that I was going to one village, when I was actually leaving for another one, or answering vaguely about where my husband was, weighing my answers in every situation. I learned to

¹⁰ Recorded interview 23rd September 2002. His name is altered.

use “*ishi*”, as a way of getting around things I did not want to be direct about. I likewise became increasingly reserved about telling anyone anything about my own experiences and feelings, where before I had been more open and generous. However, I soon realised that ceasing to play all my ‘cards’ would make me nothing more than a mere outsider. Thus I understood that I had to play those cards necessary for being socially involved, without unnecessarily exposing myself or my intentions.

The fluidity in social relations had been first drawn to my attention on returning to the market town after a period of a year or two. On noticing that many of the people who had frequented the *bunabét* where I used to stay did not come anymore, even if they were still around, I asked about it and was told, “*tebaisna*, we quarrelled”. Then after some time when some of them reappeared, I was told, “*teareqh’na*, we have reconciled.” These answers implicitly acknowledge tension and conflicts in daily life-situations, but also indicate the importance of the social practice of reconciliation to maintain social relations. And as Abeba’s story in chapter 5 and her comment above shows, tension is also acknowledged within marriage, an institution traditionally based on alliance-building.

Alliance-building challenged by women’s agency

The traditional practice of early marriage in Tigray – negotiations might start even before the children are born – are creating and reassuring alliances between families. Although the legal age for marriage in Tigray has been raised to eighteen for women, many girls are still married off earlier. Especially in the rural areas, the traditional imperative on virginity¹¹ makes it important to marry the girl before parents lose control of the ‘symbolic capital’ her sexuality represents, in order to be affiliated to families of status and wealth (Haile 1994). This economic aspect of social relationships seems to perpetuate the practice of early marriage. While marriageable age is influenced by girls’ access to education, both in rural and urban areas, the imperative on virginity seems to be more persistent precisely because of this economic-relational aspect of marriage.

As mentioned earlier, the same need for control is not exercised in relation to men’s pre-marriage, and for that sake extra-marital sexual practice, possibly because a virile sexuality confirms culturally sanctioned masculinity, while the opposite is true for women. Trying to understand the importance of female virginity, I asked Michele¹², who is not married, but has fathered two children out of wedlock with two different women, if he planned to settle down and get married, and if he did, did it have to be with a virgin. He answers: “of course I will

¹¹ Haile Gabriel Dagne states in *Socio-Cultural Background of Early marriage in Ethiopia*: “The husband, (...) is entitled to demand from his wife not only service, loyalty and obedience, but also virginity and chastity, with little reciprocity from his side. Virginity is raised to an absolute pre-condition, without which first marriage for girls cannot take place, or if it does take place, it dissolves immediately” (Haile 1994: 8).

¹² Recorded interview 6th November, 2002. His name is altered.



Beyenesh (17) is engaged to be married with *haleq'a* Fetwi when she reaches the age of eighteen. She likes him, but she admits she would have liked to go to school too. She hopes there might be a possibility later. July 2001.

marry a virgin." Why, I ask him, is it important that she is a virgin, when he is not? He says he has not been married before, and that his elder brother and the rest of his family would want it to be like that. "That is why," he says.

Marriage in my area of research in western Tigray, would most often be consummated before the actual wedding celebration. This arrangement acknowledges the fact that marital relations chosen by parents do not always work out, and gives the young couple a possibility to try it out first. Likewise, with the norm of virginity on the part of the young girl, this practice makes it possible to send her back if it is discovered she is not a virgin, before the cow is slaughtered and a big party launched. The cultural imperative on virginity could however be interpreted as implicitly acknowledging female agency; otherwise there would be no reason to control her in the first place.

At the marriage the couple would sleep together in a room prepared for the purpose, and which the bride cannot leave for forty days. Then she will return to her own home, usually for a year, before he picks her up again and takes her to his *adi*, homeplace, and their new home. During that one-year period he will visit her occasionally and they will sleep together. When I told one newly wedded groom that I myself could not stand the thought of being locked up in a room for forty days, only allowed to sneak out for a pee, and probably would have run away during the night, he said "please don't tell her, she might catch the idea of doing just that". When I visited the couple the young bride was sitting with a horde of children curled up on the *medeb*, the bed built with rocks and coated with a mixture of clay, straw, ash, cow dung and water to a silk-like hard surface; her *nets'ela*, the traditional white shawl, ready at hand to cover her face if too embarrassed. He pointed at her and said: "Girls in Tigray are embarrassed at their marriage. The bride will resist sex, but seems to like it." Being too willing and outspoken however, would most likely destroy her reputation as a respectable woman, and she would be called *asha merat*, foolish bride.¹³ This further indicates the limitations attached to the expression of female sexuality, and likewise, the ambiguity inherent in her sexuality, in-between normative passivity and a perceived strong sexual urge. The young bride is supposed to protect her virginity as much as she can and struggle against the groom's attempts at sexual intercourse. The groom is supposed to struggle as long as it takes to penetrate her.

Interviewing women, I was amazed at how many of them had run away from their first marriages, staying for a month only, up to just a few years. For their second conjugal relationship

¹³ Haile (1994) further states that "[g]irls are brought up to be shy (...), [a]nd friendly contact with a male would be suspected as an expression of sexual desire that might lead to pre-marital intercourse. Girls are taught by mothers and grown-ups to suppress their feelings, desire, and even curiosity, to give the semblance of innocence, a good conduct that satisfies the norm of dependency attributed to a submissive woman" (Haile 1994: 91).

Kebrä (24) was married at the age of fourteen. After four years she broke off her marriage and is now determined to get an education. She has one child, Mahlit (3) with a boyfriend. Her choice of hairstyle for the picture would, by standards both in the village and in the market town, be considered highly inappropriate for a woman who wants to secure her moral reputation. July 2002.



the women would be freer to choose men of their own heart like Kedist¹⁴ who was married for the first time when she was thirteen. “I stayed three months; then I returned home. I told them I did not want it. I will not go.” She stayed at home for another three years before she married again, this time of her own choice.

Lula’s¹⁵ parents had made arrangements for her marriage before she was born; if she happened to be a girl the two families had agreed on marriage. Later on, the families had a quarrel and the engagement was broken off. When she was twelve she was engaged again and later married. “I was thirteen or fourteen; it was in 1972 E.C. (1980). It was my father who arranged it; it was his choice. I did not know about it. They said: “‘Kidi!’ Keyde. ‘Go!’ I went.” After three years she gave birth to a daughter. She stayed an additional two years before she joined the TPLF- fighters. Lula left her daughter with her husband’s mother, and went. She left her husband without telling him. “He did not know about it,” she says. Lula sent him a message from the field to tell him that their relationship was over. When the sexual abstinence rule for the fighters within TPLF was lifted in 1985, she found another man.

Thus, in spite of the emphasis on marriage to reassure relations between families, there seems to be a possibility for change if the conjugal relationship, chosen by relatives, does not work out.¹⁶ I am not stating that a woman is not facing a certain risk of being punished or excluded by opposing her family’s choice. However, the family bonds seem so important, emotionally and materially, that it takes a considerable amount to actually break them. This ambivalence in relation to the marriage norm and kinship relations according to Bourdieu (1977) on parallel-cousin marriage in Kabylia, Algeria, is due to “the genealogical relationship is never strong enough on its own to provide a complete determination of the relationship between the individuals which it unites, and it has such predicative value only when it goes with shared interests” (Bourdieu 1977: 39). My point here is that there seems to be a pragmatic attitude in play if things do not turn out according to norms; likewise that complying with a norm is coupled with a pragmatic interest, as in Michele’s case, according to tradition reassuring relations with his own kin encourages the release of a part of the family’s household estate at the time of marriage. However, this focus does not implicate that family relations are free from tensions and conflicting interests. I think these tensions are inherent in women’s life-stories, which show their choices over time; sometimes complying with social demands and cultural norms, sometimes following an individual path.

¹⁴ Recorded interview 17th October, 2002. Her name is altered.

¹⁵ Recorded interview 16th October, 2002. Her name is altered.

¹⁶ Tracing kinship in Tigray revealed a mobile individual. At times I felt a certain link to Napoleon A. Chagnon (1997), himself being fooled about Yanomamö kinship in the Amazons. The matter in Tigray is complicated exactly by serial marriages and the common occurrence of children born out of wedlock. Children might grow up with relatives other than their mother and father; their cousins age within the extended family being classified as brothers and sisters.

Women's resilience

The individual drive underlying the Ethiopian highland societies has been historically attributed to the mobility in the social hierarchical structure itself, and in the structuring of the household, which is based on the nuclear family.¹⁷ According to Dan F. Bauer (1977) in *Household and Society in Ethiopia*, Tigrayan individuality is not only a cultural value, but the Tigrayan individual is individuated through the household development process where he repeatedly finds himself separated from others with whom he has been living. Bauer further states that “[n]or does the Tigray[an] have the solidarity with his peers one might expect in another society in which inequality was based on permanent strata, because who his peers are changes with household fortunes” (Bauer 1977: 159-60). New members are brought in and others leave as task requirements and household resources dictate, and as junior members leave after their marriages. However, this institution must also be understood as concerned with reproducing the culturally defined sexual division of labour, and thereby women's traditional role as mothers and housewives, as well as her secondary status in relation to men.

Bauer's study from eastern Tigray, conducted between 1968 and 1970, suggests a divorce rate of 45 percent (Bauer 1977: 127). Helen Pankhurst's study from Menz in the end of the 1980's also points to the fragility of the conjugal relation in highland Ethiopia¹⁸, the average number of marriages per adult being 3.3 (H. Pankhurst 1992: 178). What remains unanswered in Bauer's study however is if the individuation process contained within the Tigrayan household also concerns women, as he makes no explicit reference to them, other than concerning marriage as an institution in flux. My suggestion however, is that precisely the fragility of marriage is a fact that potentially *counters* the impact of the traditional household organisation, indicating both relational and spatial mobility in women's lives.

Women's life-stories show that they both travel, and are willing to travel far to be able to manage. Abeba above traveled to Sudan and the Middle-East before she came back to Tigray as a wealthy woman. Lula tried her luck in Saudi-Arabia and Yemen without the same

¹⁷ The official practice of naming in Tigray (and in Ethiopia in general) shows in my opinion how individuals are seen to make up kinship relations as there is no family name following kin. A girl or boy gets her father's first name as her second name and again his father's first name as their third name. A woman will keep her maiden name all her life, continuing to show her position among agnates, even after marriage. Kinship is thereby designated by individuals, acknowledging kin through male individuals through time. In addressing people it is the first name that is used; this goes for everyone, your mother and father as well as the prime minister and the president. Being called by your mother's first name is considered a shame though, implicitly questioning her morals since she has no husband to take care of her children.

¹⁸ Richard Pankhurst notes in *A Social History of Ethiopia* that in the Middle Ages most marriages, particularly among the aristocracy, could easily be dissolved. “This freedom,” he says, “contrasted with the then extreme rigidity of marriage in Europe, (...) [as] spouses recognised from the outset that their marriages might only be temporary” (Pankhurst 1992: 69).



Shewita (9) is engaged to be married. The marriage will take place after a few years with a boy five to six years older than her from the same area. They say she has agreed to it. Two of her older sisters have chosen an education instead of entering into marriage at an early age. August 2001.

success. When Lula was demobilised, she had thought, she tells me¹⁹: “I had to eat. I thought there was money in Saudi-Arabia.” She laughs. Instead of reaching the shores of Saudi, she and her companions were captured by the Eritrean authorities for illegal migration. She spent six months in prison in Batse [Massawa], in Eritrea. Released from prison, she headed for Saudi again, but found it was not the Promised Land after all. She soon returned. Instead she decided to try her luck in Yemen. Again she departed from Batse. This time it was the Yemeni authorities that imprisoned her for illegal immigration. The political climate between Eritrea and Yemen was tense at the time over the Harnish Archipelago. She was imprisoned for another one and a half years. “Then they asked me: “what kind of work can you do?” She had learned nursing when she first joined the fighters, before she was assigned to combat, so she worked another one and a half years in a government hospital in Yemen. They refused to pay her salary if she was not married to a Yemeni. Lula returned to Ethiopia after three years without her money.

When I ask Kedist²⁰ what she thinks about her future she says without hesitation: “I want to go to Australia. In this place Thera, there is no work, no possibilities.” A relative is already there. I ask her if she will take her children with her. She says she will go alone, maybe after four, five years. “If you find another man,” I ask her, “would you take him?” “*Aydelen*,” she says, “I do not want another man. I will raise my children alone. I will live in celibacy ... go to church”. She smiles when I mock her about becoming a *felasit*, a nun. “It is my will, my freedom,” she says.

It is important to bear in mind that the seemingly agreed on individuality in highland Ethiopian societies does not rule out collectivism. However, it matters what cohesive and coercive mechanisms are at play to hold collectives together. This focus concerns not only cultural norms, but also the pragmatic socio-economic or political reasons for maintaining the collective. As a matter of fact, Tigrayans have endured a revolution since Bauer conducted his study, during which individualism²¹ was perceived as not of much help to the struggle. Even if I have been concerned with individuality, promoting individualism as an ideology, making the ‘I’ the centre of the universe, and cultivating difference and non-attachment, has definitely not been my intention. On individuality as a western centred ideology I therefore found that Meredith Turshen (2000) asks a most relevant question: “[d]o societies that place social obligation before narcissism and egotism block individuation?” (Turshen 2000: 91). Turshen goes on to explain her critical question by pointing out that,

“[t]he commercial purpose of repressive colonial regimes led European colonizers to see Africans as group members, rather than as individuals, and social cohesion as constraints that impeded the development of individuals able to act in their own interests.

¹⁹ Recorded interview 16th October, 2002. Her name is altered.

²⁰ Recorded interview 17th October, 2002. Her name is altered.

²¹ Victories were considered collective achievements; “only the dead are heroes” (Hammond 1999: 268).

This failure to see Africans as individuals collapses two concepts – individualism and individuality.” (Turshen 2000: 92).

It seems to be a product of the concept’s ideological implications that individuality and collectivity are understood as opposed, and potentially mutually exclusive. This point has implications for my analysis on agency as strategy with gendered implications. The above examples on marriage as a relational institution, and women’s personal stories about how they tackled their arranged marriages at an early age, serve as illustrations on my point. Their stories confirm that social relations must be understood as fragile, also for women. And even if women’s possibilities might be limited in the Tigrayan socio-economical context, it has never prevented young women from running away if the cultural constraints are perceived as too severe.

With a focus on men’s individuality, different writers on Ethiopia have identified shifting alliances and mobility in social relations in the quest for political power and status, as a significant historical and inherent aspect of Tigrayan social practice. However, the mistrust and jealousy prevailing in social interaction makes relations and alliances fragile, even on the level of daily-life situations. Hence, individuation in the Tigrayan context must be understood as structurally inscribed – not as Corin (1998) suggests, in ritual or possession – but precisely in this fragility of social relations, and as such also includes women.

CONCLUSION

I must admit that during the course of my fieldwork in Tigray, I realised that I carried with me a simplified and stereotypical image of Westerners as individualistic and the 'Others' as collectivistic. However my research did not reveal anything I can use as confirmation that my prefixed image of 'them' as collectivist only was correct. Instead I realised that a structuralist division of the world in binary oppositions, in this case between individuality : collectivism :: Western : African, even if these concepts are claimed as good to think with, do not manage to represent the complexity of lived life, tending to cross-cut theoretical categories. Discovering that many writers before me had highlighted the individuality of the highland people of Ethiopia, an empirical reality reminded me that individuality does not imply absence of a collectivist consciousness, nor does it exclude the need to build alliances.

Likewise, the process of individuation associated with modernity, Ellen Corin (1998) emphasises, must not be understood entirely as a new phenomenon, because it "coincides with an already existing principle of individuation" (Corin 1998: 102). Hence, the question is maybe not so much how modernity structures individuality in the African context, but how modern influences reinforce or restructure already existing structural patterns. In the Tigrayan context, individuation must be understood as structurally situated in the socio-historical practice of alliance-building, and the implicit fragility of relationships, and thus culturally inscribed in the mobility of the social structure itself. The apparent mistrust in social interaction creates a vulnerable individual who must manage the fluidity and fragility of social relations in her own life. This social mobility makes it possible to interpret resilience as an embodied cultural practice for both men and women.

The prevailing gendered division of labour however, places limits on both men's and women's agency to pursue alternative strategies which imply a break with socially sanctioned gender norms; at least in public. That women's agency might be less 'visible' than men's, is based on the fact that women tend to under-communicate their agency beyond the norm. Their compliance with sanctioned gender identity must however be understood as a strategy towards negotiation of their position, and as such provides them with access to scarce resources in the local community. Men can of course resort to similar strategies, but whereas men traditionally have been concerned with confirming their gender identity by being 'seen' as active and able, women tend to subdue a certain range of their abilities. Women cannot confirm their womanhood by being 'seen' as courageous, as the fighter-women indeed have experienced, but by being 'seen' as fulfilling their role as mothers and submissive wives. Beauty is likewise acknowledged as a female quality; wealth more than agency, would signify a woman's success. However, being 'seen' in the Tigrayan context is ambiguous, as a woman's beauty and display of gold might arouse *buda*-attacks based on somebody's jealousy.

Although the fighter-women might keep photographs of themselves in fighter attire, as a proud memory of their time in the field, this particular self-image has not been collectively acknowledged in civilian society. Hence, female fighters' experience during the revolution is in my opinion treated as an *anomaly* situated in *berekha*, the 'wilderness', and an exception that ended with the struggle itself; hence the knowledge gained by these women is privatised. However the way both men and women use the photographic situation, to be able to construct favourable self-representations, made me acknowledge their sense of self-identity and agency even when their aim was to comply with convention. My photographic practice therefore made me consider the strategic aspects of convention as opposed to understanding the norm, as something the individual is passively submerged in. Compliance might also be explained by women themselves, as a subjective choice; thus conforming to norm cannot be understood as merely equating coercion. That the fighter-women tend to under-communicate their past to manage their present does not make their agency irrelevant. Agency can be confined to spaces of privacy, or made 'invisible' by under-communication or manipulation of information. Thus, by conforming to sanctioned gender norms and conventional appearance, negative attention from the local community is potentially averted; a strategy that would secure at least a limited space for individual agency. From this point of view I interpret the fighter women returning to a more traditional life-style, as playing a card for a certain gain within the community. Whether it is a 'good' card¹ is another question.

Modernity is similarly thought to challenge gender identity as based in the gendered division of labour. Modern influences in general and access to education in particular, do however represent an alternative strategy and consequent changes for women. The fact that traditional gender roles seem to be reproduced, rather than challenged in the Tigrayan contemporary context, must however be understood against the lack of alternative possibilities for negotiations in extremely pressured economic circumstances. Hence the interrelatedness of norms and material interests is, in my opinion an instructive analytic perspective, and as such incorporates the ambivalence which the norm itself might be subject to. Norms therefore would be challenged by pragmatism, but the ideal norm might nevertheless prevail, even if practice differs, as is the case with the marriage institution in Tigray.

Within social anthropological discourse, possession practices have usually been interpreted as a way of negotiating space for expression and empowerment for the powerless, involving women in particular. Focusing on the discourses however, possession in the Tigrayan context reveals rather a tendency to control individual agency, as is also the case with witchcraft accusations and the fear of the sorcerer. However discourses on the *debtera* and *buda*, *sheyt'an* and *buda-zar* cannot, in my opinion, be fully understood from a functionalist point of view

¹ According to Bourdieu, the outcome is dependent, "partly on the deal, the cards held (their value itself being defined by the rules of the game, characteristic of the social formation in question), and [only] partly on the players' skill" (Bourdieu 1977: 58).

preoccupied with explaining the reproduction of a specific social organisation. These discourses are nevertheless involved in specific understandings of causality with moral and relational implications, and influence a cultural understanding of agency that reinforces the Orthodox Christian individual's fundamental dependency on the will of God. Agency in the Tigrayan context is thus not only an individual matter. However the co-existence of different traditions of knowledge relating to different understandings of causality seems to create a certain ambiguity that secures spaces for agency, alongside a highly influential orthodoxy. Negotiating knowledge therefore, is yet another potential aspect of individual actors' flexible handling of their life-situation. The causal explanation implicit in the discourses on witchcraft and sorcery are understood by Tigrayans themselves, as relating to jealousy, and thus addresses the impact envy and jealousy have in their lives. I therefore interpret these discourses as foremost based in a zero-sum understanding of distribution of scarce resources, also when these resources are understood beyond materiality, as 'symbolic capital' or emotional satisfaction. These discourses would further influence people's self-presentations in general; enhancing the need for impression management and hence resilience in social interaction.

Life-stories, as an important part of my empirical data, revealed both compliance and resistance in women's lives over time. Initially I had thought that Giddens (1991) provided a useful theoretical framework for Tigrayan's life-stories as a 'particular' identity-forming biographic narrative. However this analytic perspective became problematic since Tigrayan narratives in general were as much involved in layering as revealing information. But by using the personal narrative as an entrance to cultural understanding, as Jacobsen (1997) suggests, the flexibility in the narrative itself could be understood to represent a cultural strategy, to manage what is perceived as fragile relationships in uncontrollable environmental circumstances. Thus my concern is with narration as a cultural practice and its implications for social interaction and individual agency. The apparent absence of a narrative expression of painful emotions outside the institutionalised ritual of *h'azen*, mourning, suggests containment, rather than 'telling', as that which secures self-identity. In spite of the limitations implicit in gender norms, God's will and possession discourses, women's life-stories nevertheless indicate that individual actors manage, in-between social sanctions and a challenging life-situation, to establish individual careers. I would have missed this point if my research strategy was based solely on participant observation, precisely because women's strategies imply making their agency 'invisible' if it exceeds the sanctioned gender norm.

If I have internalised anything during my fieldwork however, it could be contained within the expression, "*ane suqh' ile*, I keep quiet". Knowing that everything I said and did would be distributed instantaneously, and possibly ridiculed, I learned to hold back the precious in my life; just as everyone else seemed to do to their utmost ability. This fact certainly does not prevent sociability and joyful *tets'awet*, 'play'; but telling everyone everything about you would be seen as foolish, and would make you vulnerable to acts of jealousy. Initially, I had thought

that learning native practices meant participating in practical work. Instead I found myself more and more entangled in a social play where managing information about me and others was my most important 'work'. However, I also understood that keeping social relations going was of utmost importance, since I was repeatedly tempted to withdraw, a strategy that would only have isolated me completely. Instead I learned to say "*ishii*", meaning OK, showing my positive attitude without revealing what my next step would actually be. That my husband's former girl-friend, in her attempts to get him back, distributed rumours about him to who were perceived as my friends, was a way of securing that the information actually reached me without having to confront me directly. People would be both conscious of, and selective about, which information was shared with whom, and for what purpose. Information might likewise be portioned out in bits and pieces at different occasions. This choosing of a particular version or fragment in a particular situation, might not always be obvious. However, realising that there are divergent versions at play, and even lies, is important to catch a glimpse of how social interaction is instructed, by a need to hold some means for negotiation. I have interpreted this way of creating spaces for agency by manipulating information as culturally inscribed in the art of *q'iné*. Hence it is possible to interpret the layering of information in social interaction as inherent in Tigrayan social practice, and concerned precisely with securing individual mobility.

My experience has also convinced me that managing social relations in the Tigrayan context takes a lot of time, and 'work'. Also that people think it is worthwhile investing meagre resources on social events such as *mah'eber* on saints' days, and all the other celebrations throughout the year, to reassure spiritual as well as this-worldly relationships. Except for kinship relations and a woman's first marriage, traditionally arranged by her family, individual actors do however establish additional relations they might consider beneficial, emotionally or economically; hence extending the individual actor's social field. There is also the choice of which relations are prioritised, even if one risks that other relations turn sour because of jealousy. The important point is that relationships have to be reassured to persist, and if the individual actor fails to do so it is seen as a breakdown of the mutual trust invested in the relation. Seeing African people as collectivistic or group-people, as opposed to the westerners as individualistic, tends to erase the African individual, and under-communicate the fact that an individual actor is responsible for the well-functioning of all her social relationships, including kinship relations.

My findings are primarily based on two methodological strategies, a positioning of the researcher as an actor, and on photography. My photographic practice has been an important means to create social relations, especially when my language abilities were lacking. Later, people came to think of me as 'The Photographer', and included me in their community as such. Photography thus became my entrance to the field. As a narrative strategy the photographs in this thesis represent empirical reality *differently* than text; a potential I believe is far from fully

exploited in contemporary social anthropological research, not least due to the apparent lack of analysis within the anthropological discipline, of visual representation. My analytic perspective concerning the photographs in this thesis is based in an interpretation of photographs as discourse, and thus how photographs constitute specific views of reality and the people within it. Tigrayans' active self-presentation before the camera, and their influence on the photographic situation and the photographic representation therefore, made me interpret their use of photography as a discursive social practice; constituting one potential strategy in identity formation and identity management, and as an alternative to narrated biographies. Literally speaking, photography is undoubtedly a silent medium, and thus avoids the social implications 'telling' would have in the Tigrayan context. The seemingly conventional poses together with the selective and sparse use of information about oneself, is likewise a clear indication that social interaction is perceived as risky even if alliance-building is a social imperative, and sociability is culturally valued.

Since my photographic practice had already established me as an actor, the relation to my Tigrayan husband only pulled me further into this position. Everything about me was included, interpreted and used in the community context. Instead of fulfilling the social anthropological imperative of idealised participatory observation, I found myself entangled in intrigues and conflicting interests. I must admit this interfering positioning was not always very pleasant, but it has my conviction that I would have grasped far less of social interaction if I had not been so personally involved. Since people often keep quiet about things that trouble them, I would never have understood without experiencing it myself. Being able to ask more directly about it because of my own experience, revealed information that otherwise would most probably have remained hidden to me.

In spite of their cheerful self-presentations in daily life situations, and the cultural emphasis on *tets'ewat*, 'play', women in Tigray would often say: "*ane suq'h' ile*, I keep quiet". However this expression does not manage to incorporate what women actually do. What this verbal expression establishes is an image of a woman complying with the gender norm, but it also creates a space where a woman does what a woman has to do to manage her life, or keep going for herself and her family; if necessary in silence.

Gweesh's grandmother Adanesh is blind, but wants to be photographed as well. She says: "I will not be able to see the picture myself, but it will make people remember me." April 2002.
The very day I came back to the village in June 2003 to give her the picture, she died.



EPILOGUE

In July 2004 I had the chance to meet some of the women I have presented in this thesis, and hear news about others. Again it points to life-trajectories in flux, and to resilient female actors strategising to the best of their abilities.

Abeba had split up with her husband who later left for his *adi*, homeplace. She had built a new house on her premises and rented out the rest to Ethiopian immigration authorities as a refugee-camp for an increasing number of Eritrean youth seeking refuge in Ethiopia. Kedist had been commissioned to make the daily meals for the refugees, and is, at least for the time being, secured a decent income. Lula is in the process of building her own house made possible by the money she got as a demobilised fighter and an additional loan from the REST/Debdebit credit-program. I did not get the chance to meet her though; I was told her health was declining, and that she was away for treatment. Likewise Rahwa's health condition had worsened. She had quit school, and having stayed at the holy spring in Adwa for one year without recovering, she subsequently moved with her mother and younger siblings to the lowlands in north-western Tigray to start afresh on rented land. Her body that was once blooming is now skinny and frail, and she has developed a limp, her older sister told me. Her wish to become a doctor is farther away than ever. However, those who survive severe possession might, it is said, develop healing powers. Saba wants to know which name she have been given in my thesis. I tell her I gave her a queen's name, and ask if she likes it. She smiles. We have our talk in her backyard while she is occupied with preparing *sewa* to be served at her *mah'eber* for Mariyam (St. Mary) in a few days. Saba's situation is much the same as during my fieldwork, with hard work and not much improvement. But, she keeps trying.



Appendix 1

POSTERS AND LOCAL PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

To create a reference point for my own photographs, I will present a few, in my opinion representative examples of the type of visual culture Tigrayans are familiar with. The posters on the following pages are locally available and represent Mariyam, (St. Mary), Tekle Haymanot, the Ethiopian 13th century monk, Medinalem (Jesus), and Indian actors in characteristic poses. Note how Tekhle Haymanot holds the Cross and Book in much the same way as the Indian actor Ajay holds his guns. The posters representing religious imagery are reproductions of paintings, or similar versions of paintings displayed inside Ethiopian Orthodox Churches. All these different posters (approx. 30 x 40 cm) could be decorating both market town homes and establishments like bars, *bunabéts*, *sewabéts*, the local beer-houses, as well as restaurants.

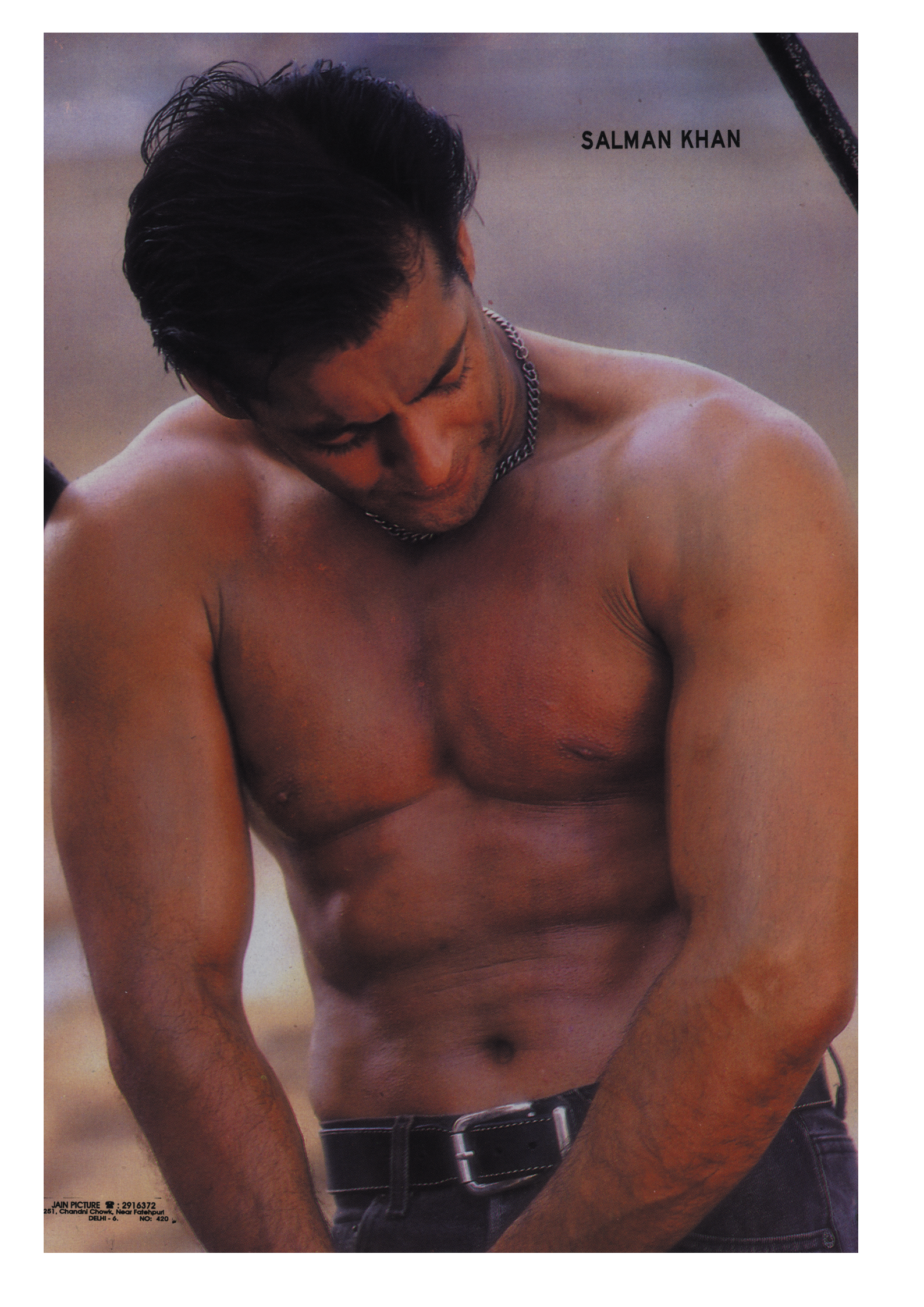
The examples of local portrait photography (left page) could be understood to relate to the different poses on the posters, and as such suggest a visual convention for self-representation. The poses chosen could likewise be interpreted to classify people according to defined identity categories such as the respectable woman, the village girl, the modern, the spiritual and so forth, or these classifications could as well be resisted. In either case the norm could be understood to constitute a visual 'master narrative' that the self-presentations would relate to one way or the other.

A normative gender identity seems to be reinforced by the stereotype photographic representations of masculinity and femininity. Maleness in the Tigrayan context could be signified by spirituality or by embodying *h'abbo*, courage and bravery as soldiers. Dress code and material markers such as gold, a radio or The Holy Book would enhance identity, as well as signify potential status for both women and men. In the Tigrayan context (as elsewhere), womanhood could be interpreted as relating to the Whore-Madonna dichotomy as posters of Saint Mary and seductive Indian actors could be displayed in the same room. Traditional clothing could be interpreted as old-fashioned, but at the same time represent respectability and cultural belonging; the display of gold would signify both beauty and a woman's success. Younger women however, could be willing to flirt with the boundary of their respectability as well as traditionalism. The latter shown by the girl who is lacking shoes and carrying a traditional basket. Traditional artefacts could likewise be used to signal Ethiopianness and Ethiopian national identity.



SHILPA

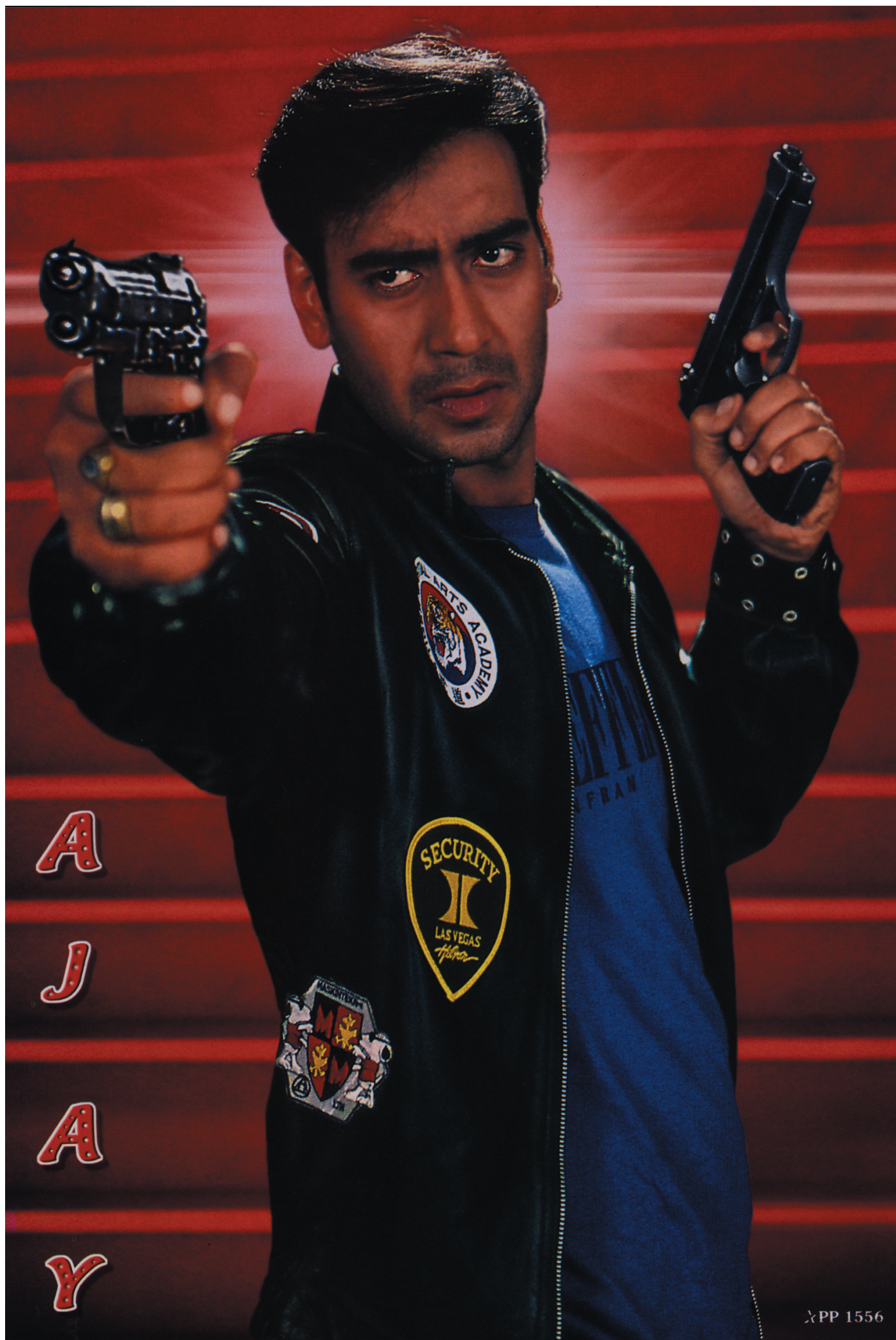




SALMAN KHAN







Appendix 2:

VOCABULARY

There are no standard rules for transliteration from *Tigrinya* (*Tigrigna*) and *Amharinya* (*Amharigna*) to English. And although the Geez alphabet constitutes the basis for both these Semitic languages, the pronunciation of the letters, *fidel* is not always identical.

In *Tigrinya* there are two sets of vowels based on; e u i a é i/e o

The above vowels resemble the ones in *Amharinya*, except for the first vowel that would be pronounced closer to 'a' in *Amharinya*. The second set of vowels in *Tigrinya* follow the same scheme as above, but are guttural. For reasons of simplification I have not incorporated these guttural variations in my transliterations. Further, the nouns are transliterated only in singular. Plural, if used, is expressed by using the English s-ending.

The plosives are market; ch', h', p' q', t', ts'. The exceptions are names of people and places that would usually be transliterated without emphasising the plosive.

The guttural-uvular version of the plosive q', is transliterated qh'.

The uvular k is transliterated kh.

<i>Abyssinia</i>	Used about the pre-modern state comprising of highland Ethiopia and Eritrea. Abyssinia is derived from <i>Habashat</i> , immigrants from Yemen around 2000 B.C.
<i>adi</i>	Homeplace, place of birth
<i>abo nebsi</i>	Literally 'spiritual father'; a priest assigned to the members of a particular household.
<i>aboy</i>	My father
<i>ato</i>	Mr.
<i>beal</i>	Holy days every month used for celebrating saints and angels within the Orthodox Christian Church.
<i>banda</i>	Smaller groups of infiltrators trained by the <i>Derg</i> to perpetrate acts of terror in the rural areas during the Tigrayan revolution.
<i>baria</i>	Slave
<i>befelt'et h'emam</i>	An illness acknowledged by science.
<i>behabesha h'emam</i>	A traditional illness such as possession.
<i>bahli</i>	Culture/tradition
<i>berekha</i>	Hot, arid unpopulated lowland areas. Because of the perceived unrulyness of these areas, I have also translated it with 'wilderness'.

<i>buda</i>	'Evil eye', a witch that is believed to be able to take hold of people and eat them from within, which causes illness and death; an ambiguous being said to transform itself into a hyena at night.
<i>buda-zar</i>	A spirit that takes hold of people in much the same manner as the <i>buda</i> .
<i>bun</i>	Coffee
<i>bunabét</i>	Literally coffeehouse, but in reality a bar usually with accommodation available.
<i>dagusha</i>	Lat. <i>Eleusine corocana</i> , finger-millet used for brewing the local beer. Can also be used to make <i>injerra</i> , the pancake that is their staple food.
<i>debtera</i>	Magician or sorcerer loosely connected to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, believed to know about, and to be able to manipulate, the powers of both good and evil, hence making their connection to the Orthodox Church ambiguous and somewhat problematic.
<i>Derg</i>	Literally meaning 'committee' in <i>Amharinya</i> , and used about the military regime in Ethiopia 1975-91.
<i>eddel</i>	Fate
<i>eq'ub</i>	Loan/lottery rotated among a group of women, making it possible for women to pool resources. All participants will contribute a given sum of money and the sum total will be won by one woman until everyone has won once, then the lottery starts all over again with all the participants.
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front; a TPLF-based coalition in power in Ethiopia since the overthrow of the <i>Derg</i> in 1991.
<i>felat'i</i>	Traditional healer
<i>fellasi/fellasi</i>	Munk/nun
<i>fenjal</i>	Small coffee cup
<i>ferdebét</i>	Court
<i>ferenji</i>	White-skinned foreigner
<i>fernello</i>	Coal stove
<i>fidel</i>	The letters in the Geez alphabet.
<i>gezmi</i>	Dowry
<i>gidgida</i>	Clay house built on a wooden scaffolding
<i>gurenya (guregna)</i>	Arrogant
<i>gulti</i>	The rights held usually by nobles or the Orthodox Church (but could also be granted to other individuals for appreciated contribution in ongoing power struggles) to collect tax, usually in kind, from the population in a specific area.
<i>Habesha</i>	Referring to the Arabic emigrants, <i>Habashat</i> venturing from Yemen to Africa around 2000 B.C.
<i>h'abbo</i>	courage, bravery
<i>h'addar</i>	A man and woman living together and considered husband and wife, although they may not always be married.
<i>h'afiss</i>	Bitter
<i>haleq'a</i>	Deacon
<i>h'azen</i>	Mourning; usually between seven to twelve days after a death.
<i>h'at'iyat</i>	Sin
<i>h'edmo</i>	Traditional stone house with timber roof, coated with flat stones and clay.
<i>h'eggi</i>	Law
<i>h'ets'e</i>	Engagement (for marriage)
<i>idir</i>	Household or women-based support network of kin or neighbours, or both, which is mobilised on the occasions of death and mourning. Food, drink and cash are provided by the network to meet the expenses of a funeral.

<i>injerra</i>	Pancake that is Tigrayans' staple food. Preferably made of <i>t'aff</i> , but would also be made of sorghum, finger-millet, maize and even wheat when this cereal is given as relief rations.
<i>jebena</i>	Ceramic coffee pot
<i>kalashen</i>	General name for all semi-automatic weapons similar to the Russian Kalashnikov
<i>keremti</i>	Rainy season in June, July and August
<i>ketab</i>	Protective amulet provided by a <i>felat'i</i> , traditional healer
<i>kongo</i>	Cast plastic sandals
<i>kusmi</i>	Annual celebration of the Orthodox Church in the neighbourhood or village, commemorating the saint connected to that particular church.
<i>kuta</i>	Thick, white traditional cotton shawl.
<i>mah'eber</i>	Monthly social gatherings on <i>beal</i> , saints' days, rotating between twelve to six households.
<i>may degam</i>	Sacred water blessed by the Orthodox Church
<i>may ts'olet</i>	Holy springs with healing properties
<i>maeteb</i>	A sign, at a minimum a thin thread showing Orthodox Christian identity. A <i>maeteb</i> is also given to the woman at her engagement, <i>h'ets'e</i> ; traditionally with a silver cross and ring attached to it.
<i>mech'edar</i>	Cleansing ritual/second baptism within the Orthodox Church.
<i>medeb</i>	Bed made of stone and coated with a mix of clay, water, straw and cow dung to a silk-like hard surface.
<i>medeb arki</i>	Literally 'bed mate', and signifying a man's best friend. Male friends are commonly sleeping together, but homosexuality is taboo.
<i>melaekheti</i>	Guardian spirit
<i>meqh'aber</i>	Burial ceremony
<i>merawi/merat</i>	Groom/bride
<i>merfe</i>	Used as a general expression for all injections, including vaccinations as well as birth control injections.
<i>mezegajabét</i>	Municipality
<i>meshella</i>	Sorghum
<i>mets'h'af</i>	Literally meaning book and used about all kinds of books including the different sacred scriptures in the Orthodox Christian Church. In common language these latter are most often not differentiated and merely called <i>mets'haf</i> , Book in singular, not plural.
<i>megogo</i>	The baking stove for <i>injerra</i> , the pancake.
<i>nets'ela</i>	The thin white traditional shawl with a coloured lining used by women.
<i>q'edassé</i>	Recitation of the Orthodox Christian liturgy
<i>q'eshi</i>	Priest
<i>q'iné</i>	Words and expressions with layered meanings
<i>q'olla</i>	Lowlands
<i>resa</i>	A person's spirit after death
REST	Relief Society of Tigray, established within TPLF in 1978; and has moved from being an aid-organisation during the revolution to concentrating on safeguarding food security and development in Tigray.
<i>risti</i>	The discontinued practice of claiming rights to land generations back, both through father and mother's lineages.
<i>sewa</i>	The local millet beer
<i>sewabét</i>	A house/establishment where <i>sewa</i> is sold
<i>shemagele</i>	Conflicts between people are treated or solved through this traditional system of mediation, and will be taken over by the state's legal system if the mediators do not succeed. <i>Shemagele</i> , literally an elder, was traditionally held by older men, but today any adult person, man or woman, who is trusted and believed to be wise, can enter this position in relation to a specific case.

<i>sheyt'an</i>	Satan; other names in popular use are <i>jinni</i> , <i>debas</i> , <i>ganien</i>
<i>shermut'a</i>	Prostitute
<i>shifta</i>	Outlaws; but could also be used to categorise dissidents
<i>t'ebenja</i>	Weapons (in general)
<i>t'aff</i> (<i>Amharinya:t'eff</i>)	Lat. <i>Eragrostis tef</i> ; a small-kernelled grain that is used to make their staple food, <i>injerra</i> .
<i>tegadalay/tegadalit</i>	Fighter (male/female singular)
<i>tegadelti</i>	Fighters (plural)
<i>teskar</i>	Commemoration gathering for a deceased usually after forty days.
<i>tets'awet</i>	Tigrayans would translate it themselves with the English word 'play'.
<i>tenkolenya</i> (<i>tenkolegna</i>)	Cheater
<i>ts'ebel</i>	Sacred powdered matter provided for protection by the Orthodox Church.
<i>ts'om</i>	Fasting
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
<i>wanch'a</i>	The container used for drinking <i>setwa</i> , traditionally made of horn or calabash.
<i>Weyane</i>	Refers to TPLF and commonly interpreted as 'revolution'.

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